

STAR WARS

**SWORD OF THE JEDI
BOOK TWO**

REVENGE

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HANDOFTHRAWN45**



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DEDICATION

To the memory of Aaron Allston, 1960-2014

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Back in 2012, when I heard Disney bought the right to everything Star Wars, my first thought was: 'There goes the EU.' And I knew that, no matter what Disney did with the franchise, their new stories would never mean as much to me as the universe and characters I already knew. Troy Denning's 'Crucible' tried to give the Big Three movie character some kind of send-off, and I was hoping Christie Golden's planned 'Sword of the Jedi' trilogy would come out before Disney rebooted the EU and give some kind of closure to Jaina Solo, Ben Skywalker, and all the 'next generation' characters I very literally grew up with. No such luck. Those characters, those stories, were stuck in forever-limbo while Disney moved on to other things and so did most of the audience. But when you grow up with someone, it's hard to just let go, and it's worse seeing them stuck in limbo.

It took me a while to remember that if you want something done right, do it yourself.

So this is my 'Sword of the Jedi' trilogy. This is one person's attempt at a grand finale to the Legends EU and especially the heroes of the New Jedi Order. I wrote it for myself, for the closure, and only recently thought somebody else might want to read it too. It not only continues the story after the 'Fate of the Jedi' series, it also draws together story threads from other parts of the saga and wraps them all together: the new Wraith Squadron introduced in Aaron Allston's last X-wing book, Boba Fett and the Mandalorians, the Legacy comic series, even the prequels. It goes back to old haunts and brings back characters that haven't been seen in a while and some you probably never thought you'd see again. Each installment is novel-length and the last volume ended up longer than the other two combined (because if you're writing a grand finale, you might as well make it pretty damn grand).

'Star Wars' has always been a family saga, especially in the original movies, and I wanted to focus on that element here. This is a trilogy about sons and daughters and especially brothers and sisters. Most of all, it's about two twin siblings who drove so much of the saga through the New Jedi Order series and beyond. It's a story about remembrance, revenge, and, ultimately, redemption. It's about moving on.

If a few people find this half as satisfying to read as it was to write, well, I guess things worked out in the end.

NOTE FOR 2021

I started writing 'Remembrance' back in the winter of 2016. I'd spent the previous year doing a grand review of Legends books, in what I thought of as a farewell tour before 'The Force Awakens' came out. I found myself still wanting a continuation or conclusion of the original EU and decided to try my hand at writing some. When I finished 'Remembrance' I put it aside and worked on something totally unrelated for the rest of the year. But when 2017 rolled around I decided to go back to the Star Wars story I'd haphazardly started. When I began 'Revenge' I still wasn't sure if I was serious about making my own climax to the Legends stories, but by the time I finished I was ready to plow ahead into 'Redemption' and make an end of it.

After that I thought it was mission complete and I was done writing Star Wars fanfics. Obviously I was wrong about that too.

As I wrap up 'Legacy's End' I've gone back to 'Sword of the Jedi' and done a little clean-up for a trilogy I started more or less on the spur of the moment. This 2021 version is the same story; there aren't any huge changes but I've gone through and fixed up typos, smoothed out prose, and added/removed/changed scenes here and there. So after five years I'm putting out this final, definitive edition. After all, it's supposed to be a story about ending things.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Myri Antilles, prisoner (human female)
Syal Antilles, captain, *Starless* (human female)
Bren Arefja, True Victory leader (Bothan male)
Natasi Daala, Imperial ex-admiral (human female)
Miranda Fardreamer, True Victory agent (human female)
Jagged Fel, Task Force Trinity leader (human male)
Wynnsa Fel, captain, *Celestial* (human female)
Boba Fett, bounty hunter and Mand'alor (human male)
Fy'lyor, captain, *Justifier* (Twi'lek female)
Viull "Scut" Gorsat, Wraith Squadron (Yuuzhan Vong male)
Gotab, ex-Jedi and Mandalorian (human male)
Vestara Khai, One Sith (human female)
Traest Kre'fey, retired admiral (Bothan male)
Drikl Lecerson, retired Imperial Moff (human male)
Elscol Loro, captain, *Phoenix* (human female)
Voort "Piggy" SaBinring, Wraith Squadron (Gamorrean male)
Venku Skirata, Mandalorian warrior (human male)
Ben Skywalker, Jedi Knight (human male)
Jaina Solo, Jedi Master (human female)
Jesmin "Ranger" Tainer, Wraith Squadron (human female)
Tahiri Veila, former Jedi Knight (human female)

Prologue: Lost

The stars and nebulous gasses that hung over Ossus spread across the night sky like a painter's canvas. Memorials to a four-thousand-year-old supernova drifted in front of the planet's moon and turned incandescent in the reflected light of an invisible sun. Nearby stars twinkled brightly beneath the veil, while billions more lurked unseen or glowed dully at the edges of the sky, far from the luminous swathes of stardust.

Growing up, one of the things Jaina Solo had loved about Yavin 4, as opposed to Coruscant, was the stars you could see at night. Yavin 4 being a moon instead of a planet, there were many times when the so-called night sky would be filled with the swirling orange-and-red gasses of Yavin itself, but other times the night side of the jungle moon would turn away from sun and planet both. Sometimes, when she needed to think she had gone up to the top of the great temple and stared up at endless stars and felt lost in the cosmos. Being lost hadn't bothered her, because she'd been young, then, and she knew that no matter how vast the stars, how deep and endless the void between them, all she had to do was get up, walk downstairs, and find her twin brother in his bunk, sleeping the sleep of the just.

Jaina sat on the roof of the Jedi Temple, sipping a cup of caf, at once admiring the night sky's beauty and fearing it. She nearly dropped her mug when she heard the door behind her creak open. Then she felt her mother's presence in the Force and was calm.

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In the glow of stardust, Jaina could make out her mother's expression as she stepped out onto the roof. She had her gray hair pulled back in a tight bun but the low light smoothed out the heavy lines on her face. Leia walked up to Jaina wordlessly and hooked an arm around her daughter's.

"Can't sleep?" she asked softly. On Ossus there were no sound and no city lights. The only noise came from the rustle of cool wind.

"We muster out first thing in the morning," Jaina explained. "Me, Ben, Tahiri."

"I know. I wanted to make sure I saw you before then."

"You always get up early."

"A curse of the old." Leia smiled a little. She leaned into her daughter and their heads lightly touched. She asked, "Where are you meeting the fleet?"

"Esfandia," she said. "We're going to make sure we're patched into the communications relay, and after that... into the unknown."

"Is Jag there yet?"

"He's on Coruscant. Tying up a few loose ends, he says."

"He's a stickler for detail. I always liked that about him."

"You would," Jaina smiled a little. In a lot of ways Jaina took after her impulsive father more than her orderly and reasonable mother.

"Are the Imperials going to meet you at Esfandia?" Leia asked.

"Right. And according to Jag, we're going to have a Chiss component too."

She felt her mother stiffen. "Be careful. They're harder to work with than the Imperials."

"I know," Jaina said. "Apparently they're being led by Jag's sister Wynssa. That should make them easier to get along with."

"Or harder," Leia said.

"Yeah. Or harder."

They fell into comfortable silence. When she was with her mother, Jaina found she could admire the night sky again. She no longer felt alone.

Eventually Leia asked, "Are you worried about what you'll find out there?"

"Yes," she admitted. Between Sith, Yuuzhan Vong, and genocidal Alliance renegades, there was plenty to pick from.

"Good," Leia said. "Proves you're still sane."

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"I guess, but I feel I could use some of Dad's reckless bravado right about now."

Leia shook her head, rolling it against Jaina's shoulder. "Your dad gets worried all the time. Bravado is how he hides it."

"I know."

Leia found her daughter's hand and squeezed it. "You're right to worry, Jaina, but I know you'll be fine."

Jaina felt a small chill. "Is the Force telling you that?"

"Mother's intuition," Leia said. "You've never faltered, Jaina. You never..." Leia trailed off. Jaina said nothing. They were both thinking of Anakin and Jacen.

Finally, her mother said, "I believe in you, Jaina. There's nothing you can't do."

Mother's love or the desperation of a woman who'd lost both her sons, Jaina didn't know. When Leia leaned close and gave her a dry kiss on the cheek, she felt her eyes water. The dust and starlight overhead blurred. She pawed tears away with her free hand, and when she looked at the stars again they were clear, bright, and so very beautiful.

Ralroost's white bulk hung in orbit over the night side of Coruscant. The myriad city-lights of the planet below formed matrices and whorls against the black, then turned into the dotting of stars in the same uniform nothing of space. As her shuttle neared the cruiser, Syal Antilles leaned forward in the cockpit, stretching her crash webbing to peer over the pilot's shoulder. The approaching vessel seemed luminous against the back-drop of a sleeping world, even though she knew Coruscant never truly slept. While this sleek battle cruiser, painted brilliantly white and gleaming in the beams of adjacent light-buoys, had been converted to a museum at the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War, fifteen years ago.

"I've only been here once," Syal explained to the man sitting beside her. "When I was very young. I remember watching the holo-recording of the conference where they ended the war."

Syal turned her gaze from *Ralroost* as it filled the viewport. Jagged Fel was sitting back in his chair with his arms crossed over his chest. He wore a black uniform in the old Imperial style, completely devoid of rank or

insignia. The only markings were the red Corellian bloodstripes running down either flank.

Beside her, Fel said, "I was stationed here for a time."

"I forgot," Syal said simply. Five years separated her and her cousin. Now that they were both in their thirties, five years did not seem much, but fifteen years ago it had been a chasm separating a fire-forged veteran pilot and a helpless child.

"Did you know the admiral well?" Syal asked as the *Ralroost's* pristine white docking bay opened before them like a maw. The shuttle dove right in.

"Moderately," Jag said. "Jaina served under him longer than I did. I'd prefer if she were her now, but she's busy with Jedi things."

Of course he wanted Jaina here now. Jagged was lucky that he'd get to see his spouse soon enough. Syal would give anything to see Tiom or her sister Myri again. She felt a faint stab of resentment against her cousin and shoved it aside. Despite all her heartache, she'd come here to do a job.

The shuttle set down inside *Ralroost's* docking back. The inside of the ship, just like the outside, was a pristine, glaring white. The docking bay, once crowded with starfighters, assault shuttle, and cargo haulers, was nearly empty now. A few small civilian shuttles, probably tour buses that hopped down planetside, sat in the corner. *Ralroost's* internal clock was set to Galactic City standard time, which meant the museum was now closed.

When they got off the shuttle a pair of crewmen guided them onto the flight deck. Syal smelled the cool, recycled air typical of any starship and squinted against the bright lights. Syal wondered what this vessel had been like during the war. She wondered if it had been these squint-inducingly brilliant and polished and clean, even when facing Yuuzhan Vong battle fleets in combat.

As the two crewmen helped secure the shuttle, a Kel Dor approached them. He was wearing a white uniform, trim but not quite martial, with a name-badge on his chest marking him as museum staff. He ushered Syal and Jagged Fel out of the hangar and down a series of corridors. They, too, were polished and white, but the lights had been turned down for nighttime hours.

"The Admiral arrived from Bothawui shortly after closing," the guide explained as they wound through a series of blank, identical corridors. "He's

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waiting for you in the secondary briefing room. It's been preserved ever since *Ralroost* was taken out of service. Have either of you-

"I served here during the war," Jagged said. His tone was curt and did not invite conversation. Syal wondered what kind of memories would be rushing through his mind.

"Ah, of course," the Kel Dor said. "So did I, though I doubt we ever met. I was an assistant engineer."

"I see," Jagged muttered.

"I can't tell you what it was like to see the admiral again. Still the same man, though he's gotten older, but we all have, haven't we?" the guide kept going. "I know some people hold it against him, siding with the separatists during the last war, but I think people are starting to forget that, given everything that's happened since..."

They stopped in front of the closed door. Jagged must have known where they were, because he punched the side button without asking the guide. With a hiss, the door slid open to reveal a long meeting room. The walls, as always, were white, though the lights were turned to dim evening tones. Even in the low light Syal could see one figure seated halfway down the right side of the table. As it rose to its feet, Jagged stepped into the room and, to Syal's surprise, snapped a quick salute.

"Permission to come aboard, Admiral," Jagged said.

The white-furred Bothan in front of him chuckled. "I'm no admiral, anymore. I should be saluting you, Mr. Fel. Are you 'mister' or are you something else now?"

"The specific ranks are still a little uncertain, but 'commander' would be a sufficient title."

"Very well then, commander." Kre'fey sunk back into his chair. "Have a seat."

"Of course." Jagged looked over his shoulder and gestured for Syal to follow. She did and the door hissed shut behind her, locking the tour guide out.

"This is Captain Syal Antilles," Jagged said. "She'll be leading the Alliance component of this mission."

"I see," Kre'fey looked at her carefully. His eyes caught a bit of the ambient light and she was surprised by their vivid violet color. "I was never an expert at human faces, but you do seem to resemble your father a bit."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Syal said.

"You should. He was a fine officer," Kre'fey nodded. "He's well, I take it?"

She had no idea what to say. She and Fel had already discussed with Garik Loran how much to tell Kre'fey about the upcoming mission, but she did not want to bring the conversation by throwing her own family's grief onto his shoulders.

"Captain Antilles' sister was recently lost in combat," Fel said. Syal stiffened in irrational anger.

"I see," Kre'fey said. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"There is more to it than that," Fel continued. "Myri Antilles was lost during a covert operation in the Unknown Regions."

"Should I be hearing this?" Kre'fey crossed his arms over his chest. "Remember, I am no longer a member of the Galactic Alliance military. I resigned fifteen years ago and fought *against* the Alliance at Kashyyyk."

"Alliance command is willing to look past that. It's behind them." Jagged said, then added, "Kashyyyk was something they're trying to atone for."

Kre'fey snorted. He tapped his claws on the tabletop. "I thought this place was behind us too. I haven't been here in... seven years, maybe. The last time I came it was for the annual commemoration of the peace treaty. I'd come every year until then but I stopped because coming to this place was making me feel like a museum piece. And now, by request of Wynn Dorvan himself, I'm back here again. I'd like to know why."

The ex-admiral was not in the mood for chit-chat or nostalgia. Syal was glad for that. She'd been half-afraid this conference would turn into Kre'fey and Fel waxing poetic about the horrible war they'd been through together.

Syal said, "We would like to talk to you about Bren Aref'ja."

Kre'fey's snow-white fur flattened on the top of his skull. In Bothans that meant surprise, or maybe a defensive posture. But after a moment he relaxed and said with false cordiality, "What would you like to know? Bren served under me on *Ralroost* for several years. He was a fine first officer."

"Admiral, are you aware of his subsequent political affiliations, particularly regarding the True Victory party on Bothawui?"

"Somewhat," Kre'fey said carefully. "I am aware that he was involved in the ar'krai movement, though he was not directly involved in their

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campaign- their *successful*/campaign- to force me to resign my office as Supreme Commander."

"When was the last time you spoke with him?" Jagged asked.

"Years. As I said, we had a falling out over politics." Kre'fey shook his head. "If you wanted to ask me about my associates, you needn't have called me here from Bothawui. What is this really about? It can't be Bren."

"It is," Syal said firmly.

Kre'fey's ears flattened. "Then please elaborate, because right now it seems that you are just wasting my time."

Syal and Jagged exchanged nods. Syal removed a small portable holoprojector from her pocket and placed it on the table. She turned it on, and blue light bathed their faces as it began replaying images from the recent battle in the Unknown Regions, taken from a Wraith Squadron X-wing.

Kre'fey's violet eyes took in the scene: X-wing and E-wings and coralskippers dashing about, an old escort frigate venting flame into space, a Mon Cal cruiser and Vong frigate exchanging broadsides.

Kre'fey didn't take his eyes off it. He squinted in concentration until Syal reached out and paused the recording.

"Those X-wings," he said, "Are newer models."

"That's correct," Syal said.

Kre'fey snarled, bearing white fangs. "When was this taken? Where?"

"It was taken in the Unknown Regions, during the same battle where my sister died," Syal said. Saying it aloud made her hurt and it made her angry, and she clung to that anger because it was the strongest feeling she'd had in days.

"Why is the Alliance fighting the Yuuzhan Vong again?"

"That was not the Alliance," Syal said. "That was Bren Aref'ja."

Kre'fey swung his gaze on Fel. "What are you saying? That he got himself a fleet and went Vong-hunting?"

"Essentially, yes," Jagged said firmly. "Captain Antilles has experience in asset tracking. She's been able to identify almost all of the vessels on this recording. They belong to Alliance or ex-Confederate captains, all Vong War veterans."

Kre'fey blew a long breath through his nose. "So you're telling me Bren is among them? Or that he's leading them?"

"We needed to do some prodding, but the Bothan government was ultimately very helpful. They recently turned over all communications by Aref'ja for the past six months," Syal said. It had taken 'round-the-clock work by decryption experts. Loran and Bwua'tu had brought in as many people as they could, including Wraith Squadron, to shift through the data as quickly as possible, but it quickly became clear that Aref'ja had initiated contact with all of the captains who had recently disappeared.

Kre'fey swallowed hard. "So is this a rogue Bothan fleet? Is our declaration of ar'krai going to bring the whole galaxy down with it?"

"The fleet is not solely Bothan, though it is in part," Syal said. "Krav Saiv'tu. Forl Kan'rey. Warn Entar'mal. Do those names sound familiar?"

Kre'fey closed his eyes. His furry white face suddenly looked tired. "Yes. I know them. What ships did they take?"

"Three Bothan Assault Cruisers, commanded by each captain during the Vong War," Syal said. "All three were recently decommissioned by the Bothan home fleet, despite being in decent condition. Clearly they have friends in the government."

"And what about Bren? Does he have a ship?"

Syal nodded. "A *Nebula II*-class star destroyer called *Phoenix*. Four months ago the Alliance navy sold it to the local defense force on Ciutric IV. However, when we contacted the government, they insisted that they'd never placed the order at all. It seems Aref'ja went through intermediaries to purchase himself a brand new, top-of-the-line flagship."

"He must have impressive funding," Kre'fey grumbled.

"We're still tracking all his credit accounts, mostly registered under fake names, but it appears he was well-funded by a number of wealthy Bothan hard-liners, as well as some from other species," Fel said.

"I'm surprised nobody caught on."

Syal cleared her throat. "We think that recent... instability in the Alliance created an opening for them."

Kre'fey shook his head. "So what do you want me for? Do you want me to go with you and hunt him down?"

Jagged nodded. "It is my hope, admiral."

"I'm not an admiral, I already told you," Kre'fey snarled and scratched his claws on the tabletop. "I am a museum piece. *This* is my museum."

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Jag frowned at the marks on the table. "This was a fine ship. You were a fine admiral. You were critical in helping us win the war."

"Oh, yes, I helped end a war. I didn't help keep the peace, did I?"

"A lot of us have failed since the Vong War," Jagged frowned. "We've all let down people we've loved. We've all lost things we can't get back."

Kre'fey looked around the dark briefing room and sighed. "Do you know why I haven't been here in seven years? It's because I love this ship. I love it too damned much and seeing it in mothballs breaks my heart. It reminds me that I used to be better than I am now, or can be again."

"Admiral," Jagged said, and this time he didn't object, "I believe that if Aref'ja and his people will listen to anyone, it will be you. I also believe that your combat expertise against the Vong will be invaluable. You have a chance to save the galaxy again."

Kre'fey laughed without humor. "You don't have to flatter me."

"It's true," Jagged said. "Admiral, you sacrificed your career to bring peace to the Galactic Alliance the Yuuzhan Vong. That peace is in jeopardy again. Do you want everything you've done, everything you've lost, to be in vain?"

Kre'fey sighed. The fur on his face rippled slightly. "What kind of team do you have?"

Jagged leaned forward. "Our flagship, commanded by Captain Antilles, will be *Starless*."

Kre'fey frowned. "Is it a newer ship?"

Syal nodded. "*Nebula II*-class. Came out of the same dock as *Phoenix*. This one's been specially requisitioned and refitted for deep-space missions by Garik Loran's people."

"All right. What else?"

"We have a complete task force assembling at Esfandia. In addition to support vessels, the other primary capital vessels are the carrier *Corusca Gem* under Mila Pavric and ISD *Liberty Star* under Jaren Tharen."

"Captain Pavric served under me during the Vong war," Kre'fey reflected. "She still had *Gem* at the time."

"She's an old vessel, but a good one."

"I'm not familiar with Captain Tharen. Is he young?"

"He saw fighting in the recent civil war," Jagged said, not adding that he might have fought against Kre'fey during that conflict.

"And what of the Imperials?" the Bothan asked. "What of the Chiss?"

"The Imperials are lending support vessels and two destroyers, one *Imperial*-class, the other an *Allegiance II* SSD. They'll be led by a captain whom I've already worked with, and I can vouch for her competence. As for the Chiss, they're lending a single ship."

"Anyone you know?"

"Yes," Jagged sighed slightly. "My sister."

A strange severity came over the old admiral's face. Kre'fey stared into shadows, seeing something long gone. Syal stared too. She saw her sister and the man she'd loved.

Finally, Aref'ja turned to look at them both with those piercing violet eyes. "Very well. When do we leave?"

"We ship out when the sun hits *Ralroost*," Jagged said.

"Not wasting time, then," Kre'fey bared his teeth. It almost looked like a smile. "It's a good thing I packed for a long trip."

Myri Antilles wasn't quite a prisoner, but she certainly wasn't free.

It had been a week since she woke up in the medical bay onboard *Phoenix*, and at first she hadn't been in any shape to move. After being forced to eject after the destruction of her fighter, Myri had nearly froze to death in the vacuum of space. She'd spent a lot of time in the *Phoenix*'s bacta tanks, and even more time in the med bay's bed, waiting for her legs to get back their strength. The doctor was a polite Phindian who treated her like a regular crewmember, not a prisoner of war, though it was tough to miss the armed guard constantly standing watch.

After his initial visit, Aref'ja had come by once more. He'd sat at the side of her bed and offered her caf while he sipped his own. Politely, cordially, he invited her to talk more about the mission she'd been on. He wanted to know what the Alliance knew about his operation and Myri had insisted, accurately, that she didn't know.

To her surprise, Aref'ja had seemed to accept that answer. She tried to think of it as a good omen.

Two days later, they sent someone else to chat. This one took Myri by surprise. It was a human female, probably still in her teens. She wore a military uniform like the rest of them, but she had no rank badges and she

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didn't carry herself like a soldier. Her shoulders were hunched too far forward and her head a little low, like she was always ready to duck. She wore a hold-out blaster clipped to her belt and her dark hair was pulled back in a stubby ponytail. She had a scowl that might have looked severe in an older woman but in a teenager looked a little petulant.

The girl walked straight up to Myri's bed and said, "I'm Miranda Fardreamer. Want to take a walk?"

Myri looked down at her legs, covered now beneath thin sheets. "I can't go very far."

"I know," Miranda said. "The captain thought you could use some exercise."

"That captain?" Myri blinked. "That's not Aref'ja, is it?"

Miranda shook her head. "I'm talking about the captain of the *Phoenix*. She sent me to fetch you." The girl sounded resentful. Clearly she wanted to be doing some-thing besides ferrying around prisoners.

"Okay then," Myri said. In truth, she was getting bored, but hadn't expected the guard at the entryway to take kindly to her taking a leisurely stroll.

Myri gripped the railings on the bed carefully as she hoisted her legs over the edge and lowered them, one foot at a time, to the cold floor. She put each foot into her slippers, then grabbed the white plasteel crutches the doctor had provided. Miranda watched dully as Myri stuck one crutch under her armpit, leaned on it, and shuffled the second crutch to her other side. When she was ready, she looked at the girl and said, "Well, are you going to lead or should I?"

Miranda went for the exit and Myri hobbled after her. Myri's upper body strength was pretty good and she kept pace with Miranda as they moved through the white halls. Myri had been out of sick bay a few times and had been struck by how *normal* everyone looked. They didn't dress or act like renegades out for bloody revenge. They seemed like professional soldiers performing familiar duties. None of them would have looked out-of-place on an Alliance cruiser. She realized this was because they *were* Alliance, officers and soldiers and technicians who'd probably had more formal training than she had. They probably didn't even see themselves as renegades, but as soldiers doing a duty to protect the Alliance.

Miranda led Myri into a turbolift. They were the only two inside when the doors slid shut and the lift lurched upward. Myri asked, "So, what does the Captain want? I already told Aref'ja all I know, which isn't much."

"I don't know," Miranda said. Her hands hung in balled fists at her side. "It's not my place to ask questions."

"Huh, okay," Myri leaned back against the wall, pulled the crutches out from beneath her, and flexed her shoulders. "So what's your deal? What are you supposed to be doing besides babysitting me?"

Miranda's face darkened. "Don't assume things."

Myri had to laugh. "Trust me, I know the whole sulky-young-person act pretty well. I was really good at it myself. Gave my parents hell."

"That's nice for your parents. Mine are dead."

Myri decided to shut up. She hadn't wanted to make friends anyway.

When the turbolift halted, the doors opened on another hallway, just as pale and featureless as the last one. Myri sometimes wondered if the people who designed these ships weren't trying to make them as bland and impersonal as possible. It *was* a military ship, so that probably was the goal.

"Follow me," Miranda said.

She led Myri down a side corridor. They passed a half-dozen beings in uniform, including a human, two Bothans, and a squat furry Bimm. Myri saw some blast doors slide open ahead, revealing the broad viewports and crew pit that marked the bridge. Miranda, however, led her down another turn.

Miranda brought her before a door. She punched a keycode into the data panel and the door hissed open to reveal what must have been the captain's private salon. There were a pair of gray sofas facing each other with a low table between. To one side, a few glasses and cups sat in cases behind a glossy wood counter. The viewport looked out on a sea of stars.

"Not bad for renegades," Myri whistled.

"It *is* different from the old days," a voice said. A woman stepped in from a side hallway. She was in uniform and had the marks of a captain on her breast. As she stepped close, Myri saw got a better look at her face: lined and sagging, with green eyes alone undimmed by age. Her hair, pulled back at the nape of her neck, was mostly gray and white, though streaks of red still remained. She struck Myri as having some resemblance to Admiral Daala, though this woman at least had both eyes intact.

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Those eyes scanned Myri up-and-down twice, then flicked to Miranda. "Very good, Fardreamer. You may report to the bridge."

"Yes, ma'am," Miranda said. She gave a bow instead of a salute, then left.

The captain gestured to the sofas. "I imagine you want to get off your feet."

"You imagine right," Myri said. She hobbled over to the nearest one and lowered herself onto its soft, clean cushions. She let her crutches rest at her side while the captain sat down across from her.

"I see a little of your father in you," she said. "And a little of your mother, too."

"I get that a lot," Myri said cautiously.

It was true that she was constantly meeting people who knew her father and were searching her face for some resemblance; they were usually the ones who reminded her how proud she must be to be the daughter of a war hero. She got that decidedly *less* often regarding her mother; Iella Wessiri's career in intelligence had kept her mostly in the shadows. Most beings didn't know that it had been she who'd finally killed Ysanne Isard.

"You won't have to guess who I am," the woman's smile was brittle, like her face wasn't used to it. "My name is Elscol Loro. I flew with Rogue Squadron for a short time."

The Rogues' roster was a long one, and Myri searched her memory for the name. There was a dim resonance there; for some reason she could hear that name repeated in her father's voice, with a tone of mixed affection and exasperation he frequently used for Myri's own.

"I flew some missions for your father after Endor," the captain explained. "Then I went off on my own. I worked a mission with your mother on Thyferra, during the Bacta War."

"Okay," Myri said. "So you knew them both. That's good. Better than most people. They usually just know about Dad." Without really intending, it came out sounding sharp and sarcastic.

"There's no need to be tart, Miss Antilles," Elscol leaned forward. The polite smile drooped into a frown that seemed more at home on her face. "I'm just explaining that I knew your parents and respected them, which is why I convinced the admiral to let you have limited freedoms on this ship."

"I'm not in the brig. I guess I'm glad for that."

"As well you should be," Elscol said. "I've arranged for you to be kept in private quarters. They're small but comfortable. You'll be locked inside except for select events. Mainly, pre-scheduled meetings with myself or the admiral."

It went without say that the 'private quarters' would be bugged five times over and she'd never have an ounce of privacy. Myri said, "Okay. Sounds pretty much like the brig. But more comfortable, I guess."

"Are you this sarcastic around your father, Antilles?"

"Probably more, actually."

A smile tugged at Elscol's face but she tugged it down. "The admiral doesn't believe you can provide any valuable information, and I'm inclined to agree. However, if we run into your people again your knowledge will be called upon."

"And do you really expect me to help you?" Myri cocked an eyebrow.

"No, but I'm hoping," Elscol said. "I believe that once you see what we're doing out here, you might change your mind about us."

"Hope all you want. I wouldn't count on it."

"Come now, Antilles. We haven't tortured you. We haven't thrown you in the brig. If the Vong captured you, where do you think you would be now? Begging for blessed release, if you hadn't got it already."

"Maybe," Myri stiffened. Somehow the thought had never occurred to her that she could have just as easily been seized by the Yuuzhan Vong when she was floating in space. It was something she hadn't dared consider.

"We are not monsters, Antilles," Elscol pressed. "We're not villains. We're trying to make the galaxy safe."

"You don't think the galaxy can ever be safe with the Vong around?" Myri asked. "I dunno. We've done a pretty good job of messing things up ourselves lately."

"You're young," Elscol made it sound like an insult. "You don't remember the last war."

"I didn't fight," Myri admitted. "But I remember being on Borleais with my parents, when we defended it for months."

"Then you still haven't seen what they do to places they conquer. I'm not counting Coruscant, they've re-claimed that for the Alliance." Elscol leaned forward. "I spent a year on Ord Cestus with my unit. They were ex-Imps. I'd met them on a Rogue mission and they were with with me at Thyferra,

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with your mother. I'd been with them for decades. We had to watch the Vong exterminate the local nests and replace native life with their own abominations. We saw the slaughter and when we tried to stop it we were slaughtered too. I was the only one who made it out."

Myri swallowed. "I'm sorry. I honestly am. But I guess I'm my parents' daughter, and I don't see them condoning genocide for the sake of revenge."

Elscol gave a sour smile. "Your parents were always idealists. On Thyferra, your mother stopped me from assassinating an Imperial-allied Bacta cartel owner, did you know that? The moral high ground was more important to her than winning the war."

"Let me ask you this, Antilles. Say your new neighbor owns a rabid nek battle dog. All it knows how to do is kill. It already ate women and children the last place it lived. You'd call your neighbor insane for having one, but your neighbor insists he can keep the nek on a leash. He insists it could never, ever, ever harm anyone and asks you to trust him. Would you, Antilles? Would you really trust him?"

Myri swallowed. "That's not a fair analogy."

"Stupid child," Elscol spat, suddenly fierce, "That's *exactly* what's going on. We trusted the Jedi to keep an alien dog on its leash, but the Jedi can't even keep their *own* dogs under control! Oh, I know your father trusts the Jedi. I know he has many friends there. And I'll even admit the Jedi, by and large, have good intentions. But what did all that hope and kindness and good will get them when faced with Jacen Solo or Abeloth? I'll tell you what it got them. It got *all* of us a lot of dead bodies."

Myri didn't have answers, but she knew the bitter, twisted anger inside this old woman wasn't the solution. "I'm sorry you feel that way. I don't know what to say."

Elscol blew out a long breath. "You're dismissed for today, Antilles, but we'll speak again." She tapped her comlink and said, "Fardreamer, report to my ready room. You're to take Antilles back to sick bay."

Myri picked up her crutches and rose to her unsteady feet. She held both plasteel sticks under-arm and didn't offer her hand to the captain. Elscol didn't offer hers either. When Miranda showed up, still scowling, Myri hobbled out into hallways that seemed more cold and sterile than ever before.

Part I: The Quick and the Dead

Chapter 1

Starlines became stars and the drop ship jerked violently as Yaga Minor's gravity well tore it out of hyperspace. The soldiers within, lined shoulder-to-shoulder with their backs against the passenger cabin's two long walls, jostled in their crash webbing as they careened toward their target. The drop ship fell so quickly toward the star destroyer's gray bulk that the defense platforms failed to track it.

Even as it approached the giant vessel's aft, strangely serene without its three blue ion engines aglow, the drop ship barely slowed. The pilot nudged the ship a little, adjusting telemetry so it shot like an arrow toward the arched spine that connected bridge and conning tower to the destroyer's edge-shaped bulk. Another nudge, then a third. The destroyer's garbage disposal chute filled the viewport.

Five, four, three, two, one.

Drop.

Retro-burners roared to life, not enough to keep them from smashing through the Destroyer's back door, but enough so that they merely crashed inside the garbage processor instead of exploding on impact. The force was

still enough to shake, rattle, and nearly knock out the soldiers still clinging to their crash webbing inside.

Then the drop ship's side door swung open. Air howled as the vacuum sucked it up in seconds. Then the soldiers, temporarily secure in their airtight armor, unhooked their crash webbing and grabbed their weapons.

Boba Fett clasped the T-77 rifle in one hand, hoisted it high, and shouted, "*Oya Mando!*"

"*Oya Mando!*" his soldiers repeated, and two dozen Mandalorians charged down the throat of the *Chimaera*.

This wasn't the first time Fett had hijacked a Star Destroyer. Some of the same people who took *Bloodfin* four years ago were with him, now, and unlike the heavily-guarded flagship at the Battle of Fondor, this one was a literal museum piece, barely-staffed and in the process of being decommissioned. Stealing the legendary *Chimaera* would be easy.

Probably, anyway.

Enough of *Chimaera*'s systems were still online that emergency blast doors began to groan into motion in order to seal off the decompressed areas from the rest of the ship. Ten meters above the Mandos' heads, two massive slabs of durasteel and permacrete were grinding toward one another to seal off the garbage disposal.

Lucky for them, Mandalorians were not ordinary raiders.

Fett took the lead and fired his jet pack. Its torrent of flame thrust him upward, easily slipping between the closing doors. The other Mandos that had jet packs did the same, while those that did not latched on to their comrades or fired grappling hooks that dug into the sides of the chute and pulled them up through the closing maw. When the door finally sealed and the compartment began to re-pressurize, every soldier was safely inside and double-checking his or her armaments.

"Don't dawdle," Fett told them. "Don't waste the element of surprise while you've still got it."

"No problem, *Bob'ika*," a gruff but enthusiastic man's voice scratched in Fett's helmet.

"Carid, take your team. Secure the hangar."

"Copy. Have fun on the bridge."

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Fett didn't bother to respond. Eighteen Mandalorians followed the lead of the broad-shouldered soldier in dark purple armor and charged down the nearest hallway.

Fett threw his gaze over the fifteen remaining. They were armor of all sizes and colors, but all shared the T-shaped visor that marked them as part of the galaxy's most infamous and competent mercenary race.

"Well, are we ready?" asked the lone Mandalorian wearing the battered helmet of an ARC Commando from the Clone Wars.

Fett said, "Ready when you are, old barve."

Mereel threw back his head and laughed at that, which was good, because the crazy old bat might just as likely have shot Fett's head off.

"Come on," said another commando, this one wearing colorful and mismatched armor pieced together from over a dozen different suits worn by his fallen family. "Let's go."

They all followed Venku, of course. Not for the first time, Fett wondered why they hadn't just made him *Mand'alor*. Having a Jedi as a mother might have hurt his chances in theory, but at the end of the day Mandos cared less about bloodlines than deeds. That was what Venku always said, pridefully. He was the one who wanted to reform Mandalorian society. Boba Fett just wanted, well...

He pushed *want* out of his head. He'd been hired to do a job and he was going to do it. That was why he was the best bounty hunter in the galaxy.

And there were few bounties more impressive than a star destroyer.

"*Oya!*" Fett shouted. The fifteen commandos echoed his shout, and they charged forward.

Carid had a lot of ground to cover before his team reached the hangar bay, but the starting point of the garbage chute was already at the base of the command tower where the bridge was located. Alarm sirens finally started to go off while they ascended the main ventilation shaft that carried oxygen to the command tower. It was barely wide enough to fit two people shoulder-to-shoulder, which meant they had to climb slowly up the maintenance ladders. On the plus side, they were scrambling all security cameras and apparently the Imperials hadn't figured out where they were yet; that or they didn't have manpower to intercept them.

When they got to the bridge level things changed quickly. They were met by at least two squadrons of stormtroopers raining laserfire down the corridor. Fett heard a cry over his headset and saw one of his men go down.

"Jaing's hit!" Mereel said. "Got him in the leg!"

"I can hold it..." Mereel's clone brother groaned. "*Shab*, this hurts..."

"Help me take him out!" said another old man.

Fett waved his commandos forward as Mereel and another soldier in red armor dragged the wounded old clone out of the line of fire.

Good, Fett thought. The less he had to shepherd around crazy old Skirata clones, the better he'd be. He still remembered those crazy barves from when he was a kid on Kamino, and he'd never expected them to come back into his life again.

It was one of many strange things about getting old.

"Everybody down!" a voice shouted. "Fire in the hole!"

Fett hit the ground just as a pair of glop grenades arced over his head. The stormtroopers saw it and rushed for cover but were stuck in the middle of the massive concussion blast.

"No more grenades!" Fett shouted over the headset comlink that connected his team. "She wants this ship *intact*, remember?"

"Sorry, *Mand'alor*," said the man getting to his feet behind Fett. "Couldn't resist."

Fett rolled on to his back to see a Mando in black and orange stripes. Jaing's grandson Mird extended a hand. Fett wanted to hop to his feet and continue the charge, but, well, he wasn't getting any younger, so he took Mird's offered hand and let himself be pulled up.

Up ahead, four Mandos were clearing the hallway and gunning down the remaining stormtroopers. At the end of the corridor, Fett could see the heavy blast doors clamped tight around the entrance to the bridge. Odds were good that there were other layers to the armored door that they couldn't see. It would take more than two grenades to blow through those, probably more than two dozen. They'd have to destroy the entire hallway before they got through those.

Thankfully, they had another option.

"Venku!" he called. "We need a little of your magic."

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The Mandalorian in strikingly multi-colored, piece-meal armor stepped up from the back of the group. As he passed Fett he said, "No problem, *Mand'alor*."

He sounded only a little surly, but he usually did.

Venku Skirata- *Kad'ika* to his family, which certainly didn't include Fett- was flanked by two soldiers in blue armor as he approached the blast doors. Fett stood a safe distance behind, ostensibly to prove cover fire if they needed it but also to avoid getting caught in whatever traps *Chimaera* might have in store.

When Venku got close enough, small hatches on either side of the blast doors slid open and two repeating blaster emplacements dropped out. Venku's guards were ready; they blasted both emplacements to smoke and melted metal before either could get off a shot.

Venku stepped calmly up to the blast doors, unhooked two lightsabers from his belt, and ignited each. All of the other Mandos, even Fett, stood and watched in silent awe as Venku stabbed both humming blue blades into the doors. Metal burned, twisted, hissed, and growled as Venku slowly moved the blades together toward the locking mechanism at the center of the doors. Molten durasteel sizzled, liquified, dripped and pooled onto the floor. He moved the blades closer together, inch by inch, until finally they sliced through the central lock. Finally he removed his lightsaber and held them at his sides.

Venku stepped away from the blast doors. There was a loud, deep groaning noise, a noise that shook the entire deck and rattled Fett inside his armor as the heavy armored panels slid apart.

Fifteen Mandalorians charged into the bridge. Venku went in first, catching and reflecting laser blasts with the constant blue whirl of his lightsabers. There were only a few stormtroopers on the deck, and they were dispatched before Fett could even get inside. By that point, the rest of the crew had thrown up their hands in surrender.

"What a bunch of *hut'uune*," a gravelly laugh echoed in Fett's ear. He looked over his shoulder to see Mereel Skirata in his scarred ARC Commando helmet bringing up the rear.

Fett didn't bother to ask about Jaing. He said, "Take positions! Let's get this boat sailing before the Imps try and stop us!"

"Yessir, *Mand'alor*!" Mird said eagerly. He skirted over to the navigation and promptly began to threaten the cowering crew. Mereel dropped into the crew pit and stalked over to the gunnery station.

One of the Mandos in blue surveyed the tactical station. She reported, "All clear, *Mand'alor*. No interceptors incoming."

"Get those thrusters going," Fett said. "I want to clear the grav well and get out of hyperspace as soon as possible."

"Already working on it," Mird reported.

Venku was over at the communications station, working the controls himself instead of just threatening to shoot the crew. He reported, "Looks like Carid's team has the hangar area secure."

"Good," said Fett. "Can we cut oxygen to the rest of them ship?"

"How much?" Bess Skirata asked at the tactical station.

"Enough to put them to sleep but not kill them."

"Already working on it."

Fett strut forward across the center aisle to the bridge's forward viewports. He saw the pale bulk of *Chimaera* stretching out for almost a mile before him like a spearhead stabbing at the stars. He was not generally a romantic man, but he thought he understood a little of what being here must have felt like for past Imperial luminaries like Thrawn, Daala, and Pellaeon.

The ship shuddered slightly at the stars began to move. Mird reported, "Thrusters are go. We should clear the gravity well in less than a minute."

"Imps finally woke up," Mereel said from the gunnery station. Couple snubfighters patrols and a Lancer coming to investigate. Won't get here in time."

"Is that hyperdive online?"

"Online and warming up," said Mird.

"Tell me when we're ready to jump. How's that oxygen going, Bess?"

"They're starting to drop, *Mand'alor*. Everywhere but the bridge and the hangar."

"Good. Just remember, don't kill them."

"We're out of the gravity well," Mird reported.

"Do you have to coordinates?"

"Already plugged 'em in."

Fett inhaled deeply and said, "Jump."

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Starlines stretched out into a blue-white blur, and it literally took his breath away.

The stars returned almost as quickly as they'd left. Fett stood at the front viewport, scanning the cosmos like a domineering sea captain of old. *Chimaera's* staff, Imperial and Mandalorian alike, stared anxiously up at him from the crew pit.

"Location," Fett said. His voice was firm, steady, and lethally quiet.

"Right where we're supposed to be," Mird Skirata called from the navigation console as he peered over the shoulder of the cowering officer.

"Where is she?" Mereel called from the gunnery station.

"Keep your helmet on, old man," Fett growled. "Comm, broadcast the signal, like I told you."

"Signal's going out," Venku reported calmly.

Fett didn't have to turn around to see Mereel slowly coming up to the center aisle. His gloved fists were angrily balled and he looked like he was ready to throttle his *Mand'alor* if their contact didn't show in the next thirty seconds.

With a tiny motion, barely visible, Fett flicked his helmet's comlink onto Mereel's private channel. "Calm your *shebs*. How's Jaing?"

Mereel stopped in his tracks, taken aback and suddenly awkward. The old clone said, "Took a shot in the leg. Gotab took him to the med bay."

"He'll be fine," Fett said. "He's a tough old bird, just like you."

Mereel seemed slightly mollified. He hung in the middle of the aisle and didn't try to get closer to Fett. The Imperial crew had no idea what was going on and stared at the Mandalorians overhead with fear and confusion. The actual Mandos in the pit with them hadn't heard the conversation but they probably figured the gist of it.

Fett wondered why he'd agreed to take these crazy old clones and clone-spawn with him, and not for the first time. And, ruefully, he quickly remembered why.

They had no home to go to either. Nobody with Jango Fett's genes did. So they were stuck with him and he was stuck with them unless his client had any new help to give.

And right on cue, a gray wedge dropped out of hyperspace three kilometers off *Chimaera's* bow. It was another, even older destroyer, *Venator*-class, like what Jaing and Mereel had served on the

better part of a century ago. Leave it to Daala to dig up more old fossils. Fett wondered whether the clones were feeling nostalgic as he flipped his comm back to broadcast mode.

"Incoming transmission," Venku reported.

"Put her on." Fett said as he watched the Venator drift slowly closer.

The overhead comlink crackled to life. Even over static the voice was smooth, seductive, lethal, and instantly recognizable.

"*Chimaera*, this is *Valor*. Congratulations, Captain Fett. You're as impressive as always."

"No need to flatter, Admiral Daala," he said. "We're just doing our job."

"And as always, you do it well," she purred. "Permission to transfer my flag aboard, Captain?"

"Permission granted. And I'm no captain."

"You are until I get there. I'll see you in the landing bay."

"Acknowledged," Fett said, and signaled Venku to close the link.

He walked down the center aisle of the bridge, nimbly avoiding Mereel as he stayed planted on the deck. Leaving the Skiratas in control of the bridge, he went right to the turbolift and rode it all the way down.

When he arrived at the landing desk five minutes later, Daala's transport, a bulky *Gamma*-class assault shuttle, was settling down. The great bay of *Chimaera* was devoid of people save a few scared, befuddled Imperial technicians and four Mandos. They stood in front of the shuttle but not at attention. Fett went right up to the big, bulky one in dark purple armor and said, "Report."

"Situation's nice and rosy, *Mand'ador*." You could hear Baltan Carid's grin without seeing it. "Two casualties, both being tended to in sick bay. They'll be fine."

"Gotab?"

"And a couple Imp medics we wrestled up. Best part is, we didn't even have to ask. Wonders what the sight of Mando helmet can do to a man."

"Good to know we're still feared," Fett grunted as he watched the shuttle's landing ramp extend. "Mereel would kill me if Jaing died."

"He'd try, you mean," Carid said. Probably still grinning.

"Kriffing Skiratas," Fett shook his head.

"Family is tricky."

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A couple crazy old Jango Fett clones and their kids and grandkids weren't his family. Boba Fett only had one person in his family and she hadn't said three words to him in the past four years. He was about to tell Carid that- just to get him to shut up- when four sets of white stormtrooper boots descended the ramp.

The stormies had their E-11 rifles raised, but the Mandos stayed where they were, making a show of being unimpressed. Fett said, "Where are you, Admiral? I don't have all day."

He heard a soft chuckle and watched a pair of polished black boots come down the ramp. Somehow, Daala had gotten herself a starched white uniform, and while she didn't have the gold epaulets or rank badge of the Grand Admiral, she was clearly trying to evoke one. Combined with the steely color of her hair, tied in a long braid down her back, it made the old woman look luminous.

Fett tilted his head. "Nice outfit."

Daala chuckled. "And you, Captain Fett, haven't changed a bit. As lethal and capable as ever."

"We both age gracefully," Fett said, though he didn't know if it was true anymore. Exile from a home he'd never called home did strange things to a man.

Carid cleared his throat. "You two gonna flirt or are we gonna get paid?"

Daala might have taken offense at that in other circumstances, but right now she seemed positively joyous at having the *Chimaera* again. She kept her eyes on Fett and said, "You'll get your credits, *Mand'alor*, but I think you'll really be more interested in my next job offer."

"I'm willing to listen," Fett said. In truth, he was more than willing. In her request to take the *Chimaera*, Daala had teased at a greater mission, and the possibility she could help him with the problem that had been ailing him for the past four years.

"Let's find somewhere private to talk," Daala said.

"I'm sure that can be arranged."

The triumphant smile on Daala's face wilted to the severe line Fett was more used to seeing. "There is one other person who should be joining us."

She snapped her fingers, and another set of boots clambered down the ramp. Fett knew who it would be even before he saw the man's face. His throat filled with bile but he didn't raise his weapon or show his anger.

Carid, on the other hand, raised and leveled his rifle, stopping Moff Drikl Lecersen as he stood on the edge of the ramp.

"Put it down, Carid," Fett said.

"Is this slimy *hut'uun* our reward?" Carid asked. "Cause we got a bunch of guys on this ship who would love to tear you apart."

Lecersen did his best to hide his panic, but his best was still far short of successful. Fett's anger mixed with satisfaction at seeing him squirm. He looked at Daala and saw a tiny smirk on her face.

"You don't want to shoot me," Lecersen said firmly. "I'm the one who can give you what you want."

"Do you have an antidote to the nanokiller?" Fett asked. "The nanokiller your own scientists cooked up for Jacen Solo?"

Carid still had his gun on Lecersen and it was making him nervous. The moff said, "I promise I will use all my resources to create one if you assist us on this one last mission."

"So you *don't* have one." Fett looked at Daala. "You'll have to do better than that. I already got the specs on the virus from some of his scientists at Hagamoor-3. The scientists who created the weapon. They're *dead*."

"They were part of a team," Lecersen insisted. "There are others who can complete their work. We can solve this problem for you, Mr. Fett. I guarantee it."

Fett snorted. "Still not impressed. If this is the best you can offer, Admiral, well, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to risk the lives of my men for the promises of some slimy sack of *osik*." He'd been picking up Mando words bit by bit, mostly the swears. Warrior cultures were always good with swears.

The smile was long gone from Daala's face. She stared straight at Fett and said, "The Yuuzhan Vong are back. And we need your help to stop them."

Fett stared. Carid, shocked, let his weapon fall to his side. Fett could barely hear the warrior mutter, "Oh, *osik*!"

Chapter 2

Wraith Squadron's ready-room aboard *Starless* wasn't much bigger than a closet, and the flight deck was still busy with ships getting pre-operational checks, so the Wraiths had their briefing in the barracks. This was a cramped space too: one narrow room with three bunk-bed sets along either wall and a long bench running down the middle.

The unit commander, Gammorean Voort SaBinring (alternately, 'Uncle Piggy') seemed to take up one whole end of the room, and the Wraith's big furry Wookie mechanic Huhunnah the other. Between them, white-haired executive officer Sharr Latt sat on the end of the bench near Piggy, while human demo expert Trey Courser and Clawdite shape-shifter Turman Durra traded banter in the middle and Drikall Bessarah, their red-skinned Devaronian medic, sat next to Huhunnah.

Sitting on the lower bunk near Piggy was Viull "Scut" Gorsat. He wasn't bothering with his usual neoglith masquer, and his gray, unscarred Yuuzhan Vong face looked distant and pensive. Perched on the bed above him was sharpshooter Wran Narcassan, currently demon-strating flight maneuvers with his hands to comm expert Thaymes Fodrick.

Jesmin Tainer felt apart from them all. She watched them, heard them, but felt nothing. Voort was talking to someone on the comlink, delaying

the start of the briefing, and as they waited Trey Courser leaned close to her and announced, "Hey, I've thought of a new squad name."

Since the Wraiths were a secret ops unit that did not technically or legally exist, they weren't technically Wraith Squadron, and it had become a running competition to come up with new names for the old unit, most of which were far from serious.

Drikall rolled eyes and humored Trey. "What name?"

Trey held up two hands dramatically, then said, "Everything Squadron!"

Jesmin Tainer watched Trey without expression; so did Drikall and Turman. Finally, Huhunna let out a pained Wookiee moan.

Finally, Turman asked, "Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"Not at all," Trey insisted as he lowered his hands. "Because really, we do everything around here. Little bit of combat, little bit of recon, little bit of top-secret communications..."

"Thaymes is the one handling that, not you or me," Jesmin said tiredly. The man on the bunk across from her had spent the past hour in the comm center with Voort, probably talking to Director Loran about something super-important. Thaymes was keeping his mouth shut and letting Voort do the talking, except Voort was still on his comm, which kept them all in suspense.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," Trey sighed and anxiously stretched his broad shoulders. "Just trying to lighten the mood."

"So it *was* a joke," Sharr muttered. "I couldn't tell..."

"Okay, sorry. I'll try to be funnier next time. *Somebody's* got to be the funny one. I've heard the stories. Someone has to be the next Wes Janson."

Sharr shifted on his bench. "Trey, I've met Wes Janson. Wes Janson is a friend of mine. You, sir, are no Wes Janson."

Trey groaned and Jesmin allowed a little smile. She hadn't smiled much lately and it felt strange on her. After losing Myri, the air of good humor and camaraderie within Wraith Squadron (or whatever they were calling themselves) felt forced.

Myri had been more than an energetic, optimistic presence; more even than a longtime family friend. Myri had been a sense of comfort and continuity in a life that, for Jesmin, had been packed with too many sudden changes. First Jedi Trainee (drop-out), then Antarian Ranger (quit), then bounty hunter (heart wasn't in it), and now finally a member of Everything

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Squadron, or whatever they were. She'd done a bit of everything and somehow being with Myri again had made her feel like she belonged, in a way she hadn't at any of those other jobs.

Now Myri was gone, and Jesmin didn't know what she was doing with the Wraiths. She still liked the people well enough... but she wished they'd go away.

Voort didn't let her get too maudlin. When he finally finished his conversation, the Gamorrean pocketed the device and stamped one heavy foot on the deck. That was enough to rattle and room and get everyone's attention.

"Alright, everyone, listen up," Voort announced. A mechanical vocoder attached to his windpipe translated his natural squeals into cool Basic. "As you know, Thaymes and I recently received and decrypted a new communication from Coruscant. Those don't come easily out here in the Unknown Regions, and everything we get is being relayed through a newly-installed, high-secured transceiver at the Esfandia communications station, using a rotating triple-encrypted frequency."

"Wow, it's like this mission is top-secret or something," said Drikall, which got a few chuckles.

"I could summarize the latest news, but it's easier to show you," Voort said. He reached into his uniform and removed a portable holo-projection disk. "Smarty, you can do the honors."

Sharr took the disk from Voort's fat green hands and placed it on the middle of the bench so the whole room could get a good look at it. He tapped a button on the side and a blue glowing image sprung up in center of the room.

The holo showed Garik "Face" Loran, director of Galactic Alliance Security, from the waist up. His arms were crossed over his chest, his bald head was bowed forward a little, and he seemed to be scowling. Jesmin felt her gut drop and wondered what new calamity had happened.

Loran tilted his face up so his image looked at the assembled Wraiths. He said, "I hope this message is coming through clearly. There's been a security leak. We're not sure whether it was our people or the Imperials. I suspect it was Imperial, not Alliance, though naturally the Imps are saying *we're* to blame.

"The doesn't matter. What matters is, *someone* leaked images of the recent battle on the HoloNet. Everyone's seen footage of a Yuuzhan Vong fleet at war with modern Alliance vessels. There's a huge uproar. Wynn Dorvan is doing his best to calm people without explicitly confirm-ing or denying, but it may be only a matter of time.

"There's already been one riot on Coruscant. There may be more to come. I just want you to know that the situation at home is escalating quickly."

Thaymes swore under his breath. Drikall paled.

Loran's face went even darker. "There's something else, something I haven't been able to confirm. Imperial Intelligence is nonresponsive it, but I have spies at Yaga Minor who say that the *Chimaera*, which was in drydock for refitting into a museum, was hijacked by a group of Mandalorian commandos and piloted out of the system. Its whereabouts are unknown. What connection this has to your mission, or the leaks, I can't say, but it's too timely to be a coincidence.

"Whatever happens, I have faith in all of you. You may proceed as you wish. If you uncover any important information- about Sekot, the Vong, the True Victory fleet, or *Chimaera*-send it through the Esfandia relay at once. Good hunting. Loran, out."

The image flickered out. Thaymes scowled and Sharr stared at the floor. Jesmin, to her own mild surprise, didn't feel sad. She felt, if anything, strangely relieved. Yes, things might be messy back home, and yes, it could affect her parents and brother, and just maybe they could run into some rogue Imperial fleet too. But for now everyone was still alive. Nobody else had been stolen from her. She almost felt optimistic.

"So that's what we're dealing with," Voort told them.

Sharr also strove for optimism. "This doesn't really effect our current mission then, does it?"

"An Imp fleet might effect it a *lot*," said Turman.

"Face said it's unconfirmed," Voort reminded, like that meant anything. "And Smarty's right. For now, barring instruction from on high, we continue overseeing scouting missions and data analysis. And if things *do* get hairy, you all know we have twelve brand-new StealthX fighters in the hangar. Generous gifts from out new Jedi partners."

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Those were good ships, and getting basic training on them had distracted Jesmin just a little from her grief.

"We continue to follow orders and follow the plan," Voort said. "But I wanted you all to be updated on the latest. We need to go into this with eyes open, expecting anything."

His small eyes drifted across the room, but everyone could tell they lingered on Scut. Everyone knew that this was the first time he'd ever really encountered his own people, as he'd been raised by humans as a child. Nobody dared question his loyalties, but nobody could understand everything that must have been going through his head.

But Voort's eyes passed over Scut and Jesmin felt them linger on her as well. A generation ago he'd fought the Empire alongside both Jesmin's parents, and as a small child he'd been like a big, green, tusk-faced uncle to her.

Just like he'd been for Myri.

But it was more than just that. One of this mission's many goals was to find the mysterious living planet of Zonama Sekot, where the Force was unified and potent like no place else. Jesmin had spent her whole life as the daughter and sister of a Jedi, but despite her Academy training she'd never been able to hack it herself. She did a good job of hiding it, that failure had always gnawed at her.

But on Zonama Sekot, so her mother and brother said, the Force was different than other places. It might open things up for Jesmin in new ways, potentially exciting or dangerous, or it might not open up anything at all. Jesmin didn't know what option she was hoping for, and after all that had already happened, she was no longer sure she wanted to find out.

Two standard hours later, the chief personnel of Task Force Trinity gathered in the briefing room aboard the destroyer *Starless*. For its captain, the experience was intimidating. Syal Antilles was accustomed to having famous family and famous friends-of-the-family, but she never thought she'd be sitting at a table, discussing mission strategy with Jagged Fel, Jaina Solo, Ben Skywalker, Tahiri Veila, and Traest Kre'fey. Nor, for that matter, did she ever think she'd be working with a red-skinned female Twi'lek Imperial officer. She certainly never expected to be sitting next to her gold-haired,

black-uniformed cousin and Chiss Expansionary Defense Force commodore whom she'd only met minutes before. The only person at the table Syal would have normally felt comfortable around was the massive Gamorrean currently speaking through a mechanical voice-coder.

It was a strange, strange universe.

The Gamorrean (growing up she'd known him as 'Uncle Piggy' but now he was 'Mr. SaBinring,' leader of the unofficial intelligence/black ops unit usually called Wraith Squadron) had just finished showing them the latest transmission from Coruscant. His mechanized voice was saying, "If you want me to relay anything to Director Loran, we should do it now, before we get any deeper into unknown space. After that it's going to get harder and harder to contact the relay station at Esfandia."

"Thank you, Mr. SaBinring," Jagged Fel nodded. The meeting room had a circular table but Fel was clearly at the head of it anyway; all eyes went to him, expectant. Fel felt all the attention and shifted uncomfortably in his chair. The man was technically a civilian, yet all three factions in this combined fleet- Alliance, Imperial, Chiss- had agreed to defer to his judgment. As such, Fel was dressed in a uniform that recalled a little of all three. Its design was Alliance, but instead of navy blue like Syal's it was a matte black fabric, like that of the Chiss, and the red Imperial bloodstripes of his father's old fighter units ran down the arms, legs, and flanks.

Sensing her husband's discomfort, Jaina Solo spoke up. Despite being a Jedi Master, she wore a dark green jumpsuit and black vest, just like the red-haired teenager and blonde woman at either side. Solo said, "I think Loran was right. I think this event, while unfortunate, is just reason for us to get our job done faster."

"Very true," Wynssa said coolly. "However, we can't discount the theft of *Chimaera*. It is almost certainly connected to our mission."

"The theft of *Chimaera* specifically is the striking part." Kre'fey said. The old Bothan drummed his claws on the tabletop. "It's an old ship, and if it was hijacked from Yaga Minor it probably has only a skeleton crew. It's a symbolic act, not a tactical one. It's going to be the centerpiece of a larger fleet."

"*Whose* fleet, then?" Wynssa asked.

It might have been rhetorical, or it might have been an honest question; the young woman seemed very composed and professional, and Syal was

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sure the Chiss had good intelligence, but it was possible she simply wasn't as familiar with the convoluted political wrangling in the galaxy at large.

Wynssa let the question hang for a moment. Syal's eyes drifted past her, toward the red-skinned Twi'lek in the Imperial uniform. Other eyes did too, most notably Solo's. The Jedi woman narrowed her eyes and asked Fy'lyor, "Have you gotten any information from Bastion about this, Colonel?"

Fy'lyor didn't respond right away. She held Solo's stare for a long moment, then shifted her attention to Jagged Fel. Smiling a little, she said, "Do you expect me to share *all* my intelligence with this assembly?"

"I believe the Alliance has shared some of its intel with you," Fel said evenly.

"Very true," Fy'lyor nodded. "However, I doubt Mr. SaBinring has disclosed everything he's learned from Director Loran. I certainly doubt Commodore Fel has told us everything the Chiss know."

Wynssa nodded curtly.

SaBinring squeaked, "This alliance is not going to hold unless we agree to share some information."

Fy'lyor said, "I'm not averse to sharing information. However, there need to be protocols going in."

"What kind of protocols?" Solo said pointedly.

"Anything that could present a clear and present danger to this fleet should be disclosed to all parties," Wynssa said.

Kre'fey spoke up. "Anything about the Yuuzhan Vong- technology, organization- should be shared as well."

"I understand I can't ask all ships to share long-range navigational data," Syal said, "But I do think star charts of everything within, say, ten parsecs of our current location should be broadcast and synced in all ships." She looked at her pale-haired cousin. "Is that acceptable, Commodore?"

The blond woman frowned. "You assume the Chiss have the entire Unknown Regions mapped in detail. The assumption is flattering, but it's also wrong."

"You have more than we do," Syal pressed. If she was going to safeguard her fleet, she needed basic information on her environs. Anything else would make her a derelict commander.

"The Empire would also appreciate proper star charts," Fy'lyor spoke up. Wynssa shook her head. "Ten parsecs is unacceptable."

"Eight," Fel said, with the tone of a man driving a hard bargain.

His sister shook her head again. "No."

"Six," Syal pressed. It was lower than she wanted but she needed *something*.

Wynssa considered for a moment, then nodded. "Very well. We will sync with your navigational computers after every jump to lightspeed."

"Good," Jagged said with visible relief. "Thank you, Commodore."

Wynssa nodded slightly in his direction.

"With that settled, let's go back where we started." Fel swung his attention back to Fy'lyor. "Will you share anything about *Chimaera* and who stole it?"

Fy'lyor smiled faintly, like she was playing a game with him. "You presume a lot, Mr. Fel. I never said I knew anything about it."

"But you do," Solo said firmly.

Fy'lyor shifted her eyes from husband to wife. "Do I now? And how are you sure? Is it your Jedi magic?"

"Common sense. Your superiors wouldn't keep you in the dark about a major threat any more than ours would."

"Very well," Fy'lyor leaned back in her chair. "The *Chimaera* was stolen by Natasi Daala and Drikl Lecersen. There's indications Boba Fett and his Manda-lorians were involved."

Wynssa was the only one to betray a look of shock; apparently Chiss intel wasn't as omniscient as some feared. For Syal, something heavy settled in the pit of her stomach. It made sense, of course. Daala and Lecersen resented Fel and what they saw as his hand-picked successor in Vitor Reige. Stealing the most famous ship in the Empire and using it to slay the Vong menace would humiliate Fel and Reige and establish them as new Imperial standard-bearers.

Jagged was apparently thinking the same thing. He sighed and said, "She was always too clever."

"Who, Daala?" Solo asked. "If she were really smart she wouldn't throw her lot in with Lecersen or Fett. With a trio like that I'd be amazed if anyone comes through without a knife in the back."

"Maybe so, but we shouldn't underestimate her," Kre'fey said. "She's an inventive warrior and she clearly understands the power of symbols."

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"Agreed," Jagged nodded. "So in short, we have one more thing to worry about."

"Yeah," sighed Solo, "We've got the Yuuzhan Vong, True Victory, the Daala-Fett-Lecersen Trinity of Terror... anybody else? We might as well add a few more."

Wynssa Fel didn't share the humor. "I think that is enough, thank you."

"It just means we have to be a little more prepared," Fel leaned forward and placed both hands on the table. "In the meantime, we're en route to the coordinates the Jedi provided us. We have two more relay jumps, then we'll send out a flight to survey the space. Mr. SaBinring, have two pilots ready with recon X-wings."

"Gladly," Voort nodded his massive head.

Fel rose to his feet. "When we drop from hyperspace next, we'll take time for ship captains to return to their vessels. Also, Commodore Fel, I'd like you to start transmitting relevant star charts covering all space from here to our destination."

"Agreed, Mr. Fel," Wynssa said, also rising.

They had a strange relationship, unlike what Syal and Myri's had been. They were not just distant, like they barely knew the other at all, but actively wary, almost distrustful. Syal's relationship with her younger, more sprightly sister had been awkward, but at least they'd been on the same side.

Everyone else began to stand too. Fel walked through the aft door into his personal chambers, and his wife followed. Everyone else began to file out the doorway into the main hall.

After they passed through the doorway, Syal sidled next to Voort. He was some three times her girth, and together they nearly blocked the hallway.

She looked up at him and asked, "Do you have pilots in mind for the recon mission?"

Syal had read the mission report from the last battle, where both recon X-wings had been shot down minutes after entering the fray. One of those had been her sister's, and Voort had been the one who ordered her into the cockpit. Normally Syal would have sought some advice or counsel from the Gamorrean, but Myri's loss loomed between them, leaving them unconnected in their guilt and grief.

"I'll take volunteers," Voort said simply.

"Very well," Syal said. "I'll make sure to have combat wing standing by, just in case."

"Odds are against us being unlucky again," Voort said.

Syal shook her head. "Uncle Piggy, never tell me the odds. I feel like mine keep coming up bad."

As chief of Task Force Trinity, Jagged Fel's quarters were located two decks below the captain's and, while private, they were less spacious. Jag, in typical gentle-manly manner, had insisted on giving the larger quarters to Captain Antilles, and after a show of objection, real or feigned, she had agreed.

Jaina was glad her husband was choosing this formal and non-obtrusive style of command, but sometimes she wished they'd taken the bigger room. This one didn't have enough room to pace and stew.

"She's playing games with you," Jaina said as she stalked from one end of the room to another, which amounted to a few long strides.

"Which she are we talking about?"

"The red one with the big star destroyer."

"I'd say she was more playing with *you*," Jagged said. He was sitting on the side of the bed and pulling off his boots. "She had every intention of telling us about Daala. She just wanted to get something out of it first."

"What, annoy me?"

"Partially." Jagged smiled a little. "Mostly, she wanted to lay down guidelines for information-sharing. It was a smart way to do it. Frankly, we should have worked this out before embarking. It was my mistake."

Jaina stopped pacing and looked down at her husband. "Jagged, don't blame yourself. This whole situation's a crazy mess. Everything's happened so fast and nobody expected it."

"They should have," Jagged frowned. "The moment Zonama Sekot went missing they should have sent a task force like this to track it down."

"Well, things got a little busy," Jaina blew out a sigh. She rotated one shoulder, then the other.

"Sore back?" Jagged asked.

"A little. I don't know why."

"Here. Sit down." Jagged patted the side of the bed.

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Jaina dropped down next to him. Jag tucked his legs onto the bed and scooted behind her. As he began to massage her shoulders she squeezed her eyes shut to savor the feeling.

"You're a good husband, you know that?"

"I try," he whispered in her ear.

"Really, Jag. Ace pilot. Skilled diplomat. Brilliant commander. Excellent masseuse. You're really the whole package."

"Please, Jaina, you're embarrassing me," he dead-panned.

She sighed, "It's no wonder you've got a harem."

His hands froze, thumbs buried under her shoulder-blades. She felt him sputter for a moment before he bleated, "What?"

Jaina opened her eyes and looked back at him. "You heard me. Think about it. Me, Wynssa, Antilles, Tahiri, Red. You've got yourself quite a collection."

"Don't forget Ben Skywalker and the two-hundred-kilo Gamorrean."

"Hmmm, them too."

"And let's not forget that I'm related to half the people at that table. Two by blood, two by marriage, not that the blood ones really count."

Jaina leaned forward and angled to face him. "Wyn and Syal don't count?"

Jagged got that stiff, please-don't-pry look. He avoided her eyes and said, "Before last week, I hadn't seen Wynssa in almost ten years. And I barely know my cousin."

It had been four years since Jacen died, almost seventeen since losing Anakin, and neither of them would ever come back. Jaina couldn't think of anything to say.

"It doesn't matter," Jagged shook his head and held her eyes again. "What's important is that we work together as a team. We have three Jedi and three factions to this Alliance. I'm going to want to spread your skills around."

"Okay," Jaina laid a hand on his knee and put on a slanted Solo smile. "Just don't tell me I have to be with Red. I don't think I could take her."

"Well, sending Tahiri to liaise with the Imperials is probably a bad choice too," Jagged said. While her husband had once been resentful to Tahiri for killing Gilad Pellaeon, her help in combating Abeloth and Admiral Daala seemed to have absolved her in his eyes, even if he didn't quite consider her family in the same way Jaina did.

"We'll send Ben to the Imperials, then," Jaina said. "After that, well, I guess I can stay with the Chiss. Get to know the in-laws."

"Spending time with my sister would be... interesting for you."

"'Interesting' as in interesting, or 'interesting' as in terrible?"

Jagged shrugged and smiled weakly. "As I said, I don't really know Wyn anymore. She's certainly changed from when we were young. From what I can tell, though, she's Chiss through and through."

"Meaning what exactly? Disciplined? Severe? Ruthless?"

"All those things," Jag nodded. "Secretive, also. I was surprised when the Chiss offered to come on this mission. And suspicious."

"What do you suspect?"

"I don't know," Jagged sighed. "That's what I want you to do when you accompany Wyn over to *Celestial*. Be suspicious. Observe. Poke into everything. Use those Jedi powers to see what they're not telling us."

"Okay," Jaina nodded, "Just so long as you tell Ben to do the same."

"Of course I will."

"Well, that makes Tahiri the lucky one, doesn't it?"

"I suppose so. I'd also like to keep her with Admiral Kre'fey on *Starless*. They're very different kinds of experts on the Yuuzhan Vong, but I know I'll appreciate advice from both of them."

Jaina's thoughts went out to the Bothan admiral. She tried to think of him as he'd been during the War, in his pristine white ship, commanding Jedi and soldiers alike in fervent assault on the Yuuzhan Vong.

"He seems older, doesn't he?" she asked. "More tired."

Jagged chuckled dryly. "We're all old now, Jaina."

"Fierfek," Jaina sighed, "We are, aren't we?" She fell back onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling. Jagged reached out with one hand and twined his fingers with hers. "It seems like so long ago... We were kids, weren't we?"

"No," Jagged said, "No one could go through that and still be a child."

"I know. It just feels like... Despite everything that happened, how horrible it was, we were still..." She couldn't finish. She couldn't bring herself to say it. She'd felt more *alive* then, more alive than she ever had before or since. She felt like she'd been sleepwalking since marrying Jag and turning to a peaceful life. No, since before that. Since the day she stabbed a lightsaber into her brother's heart.

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"Sometimes," she said, "I really wish somebody else would apply for this the Sword of the Jedi job."

"You should try managing Imperials, Alliance, Chiss, and Jedi all at once."

"Yeah, but at least you get a harem."

"*Please* stop calling it that," Jag said, and dropped down beside her.

Chapter 3

Elscol Loro had never been one for uniforms. It was strange to be wearing one now, on what would probably be the last mission of her life. She stood in front of the mirror in her quarters, tugging at the thing, twisting it a little, wanting it to look straight, but not *too* straight. She considered braiding her hair, but she'd never been one for that either, so she let it fall free halfway down her back.

When she decided she looked formal enough, but not *too* formal, Elscol left her quarters and went to see Admiral Aref'ja.

The Bothan had summoned her to his own private quarters, a short walk from hers. She found him sitting on the sofa in his living room, sipping from a glass of Churban brandy and study the holographic star chart projected over his table.

Without taking his golden eyes off the holo, he said, "Sit down, Captain. Please."

"Thank you, sir," Elscol said. 'Sir' was something else that had always been hard for her. She understood that Aref'ja wanted to keep this mission as normal, formal, and professional as possible, but unlike the vast majority of the captains and crew in his fleet, she had never officially been part of the Galactic Alliance or the New Republic.

Yet here she was, trusted captain of Aref'ja's own flagship, all because of one awful week, a long time ago.

"You're welcome to a drink, if you'd like," Aref'ja waved a paw at the bottle and glass on the table.

More to respect his offer than anything else, Elscol poured herself a drink. She sipped the brandy and watched the star chart, waiting for Aref'ja to speak. It was the most up-to-date map of the Unknown Regions they'd been able to muster, and while Aref'ja's intelligence contacts had put together a far better survey than the one in public records, it was still painfully incomplete. More than two-thirds of the chart was empty, unmapped space. Of the stars that were mapped, a handful were colored green, marking the ones their probes had already discounted.

"It's like looking for the needle in the proverbial haystack, isn't it?" Aref'ja sniffed.

"It's not a very efficient way to find them," she agreed. "I take it you haven't been contacted by your primary source again?"

"Unfortunately not," Aref'ja growled quietly. "In the past they have always been the one the initiate contact with me. Since that Tatooine mission, nothing. I'm just glad I have other sources to fall back on."

A few weeks ago they'd dispatched Miranda Far-dreamer to Tatooine to retrieve data that would lead them to the Yuuzhan Vong fleet's largest staging ground. At least, that was what Aref'ja mysterious source had promised. This source, he'd explained to her, had first tipped him off to renewed Yuuzhan Vong activity. He'd never been able to verify the source's identity or find a way to reach them on his own. The source always contacted him, always using a different method, leaving Aref'ja entirely at their inscrutable mercy.

Because that source had gone silent since Fardreamer's Tatooine failure, they'd fallen back on searching for the needle in the haystack. This search was, in addition to being frustrating, also incredibly boring. They sent out dozens of automated probes, nearing a hundred, all searching for signs of Zonama Sekot and the Vong and coming up empty every time save two, and both of those fights had ended in stalemates. Elscol wanted to find the Vong, trap them in some gravity well where they couldn't run, and simply pound them to oblivion.

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"It's possible things may get more crowded soon," Aref'ja said, still watching the star-chart. "According to my other sources, anyway."

He was probably talking about his Bothan intelligence contacts. The Antilles girl was, unfortunately, not a good source of information.

Elscol asked, "Anything new about the Alliance fleet?"

"Unfortunately, I don't have anyone inside Garik Loran's office- he runs a much tighter ship than his predecessor- but I didn't need good sources for this." He glanced at her and bared his fangs in imitation of a human smile. "The nexu is out of the sack, Captain. Everybody knows about the Vong."

Elscol stiffened. "What happened?"

"Footage of our last encounter got broadcast to all the holo networks. Imperial or Alliance, I can't say, and it may not matter. Whatever the case, it's got beings panicked. There's already reports of riots on Coruscant and several other worlds."

"What's the Alliance response?"

"So far? Obfuscation and denial."

Elscol nodded. She'd expected nothing less. The New Republic had exchanged the Empire's cruelty for a mess of bureaucratic incompetence and corruption. When the Galactic Alliance had been born from his ashes, some had thought those old problems might be solved. Elscol had never been one of them; trust in government, any government, had always been alien to her. In her experience, you could only trust yourself and your closest allies.

The thought reminded her that she was, improbably, placed in command of the flagship of an entire fleet. She asked, "Does this affect our mission?"

"Not yet," Aref'ja shook his head. "Though it's very possible it will play up sympathy to our cause. When all this is over we just might be seen as heroes instead of villains."

Elscol wasn't used to thinking of herself as a hero. She also wasn't used to thinking of this as a mission she would come back from.

"There's something else," Aref'ja said. "This one's from my better spies. It seems a handful of Imperial vessels, including the star destroyer *Justifier*, departed Imperial space for parts unknown six days ago."

"Do you think they set out with an Alliance fleet?"

"It's quite possible. And here's another juicy tidbit. Just yesterday, the famed *Chimaera* disappeared from dry dock at Yaga Minor."

"That fossil?" Elscol blinked. Grand Admiral Thrawn's flagship was probably older than her. "I'm surprised they hadn't turned it into a museum."

"Apparently that was the plan. Five months ago it was officially decommissioned by the Reige government. And yet, it suddenly up and left."

"Five days after the *Justifier* disappeared," Elscol said. She didn't know what to make of it.

"My suspicion is that we might have allies in the Empire."

Elscol's face twisted. She'd spent too long fighting the Imps to savor the prospect. Many others in the galaxy seemed willing to move on, forgive and forget, but deep in her gut, she still hated them for the deaths of her husband Throm and her friend Groznik, among many others. Of course, if she gave up grudges easily, she'd never be on this mad chase.

She tried to think of her words carefully, but all she could say was, "I think it would be a bad idea."

"You may be right," Aref'ja allowed. "However, we may need all the help we can get, especially if Loran's fleet finds us."

"I would *strongly* object to that," she snapped, then added, "Admiral."

Aref'ja smiled affectionately. "I will take that under advisement, Captain."

Elscol sighed and took another drink from her glass. She asked, "Admiral, I still don't understand why you wanted me for this mission. I'm not an officer. I never was."

"Of course not," Aref'ja said. "*I'm* an officer. I don't want another one. I want someone who can not only fight, but fight creatively. Someone who'd not bound by conventional thinking. When we went to Ord Cestus, *Ralroost* was supposed to be rescuing you. It turned out to be the other way around. I can't forget that."

Neither could Elscol, no matter how much she wished she could banish that Vong-formed hell from her mind.

"Let me ask you this," Aref'ja set his glass down and folded his paws in his lap. "When I came to you and asked you to join me on this mad quest, why did you agree?"

"I've been fighting all my life," Elscol snorted. "The Empire, the Vong, Jacen Solo's Alliance... What else was I supposed to do?"

It was a joke answer, but it was true. Peace made her feel restless. She was good at war, but she'd never been good at peace, and the thought of

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spending the rest of her life doing something she was bad at had filled her with quiet despair.

"You're a soldier who needs a war," Arefja said.

"Yes," she admitted, "I think I am."

"Well, so am I." Arefja bared his teeth. She saw the anger in his gold eyes and remembered the ferocity behind his cool officer's exterior. She'd seen a lot of it during their fighting retreat from Ord Cestus, long ago.

Elscol was tired, but she smiled back. There was nothing she trusted more than anger.

There wasn't a lot to do in prison, even if you had a nice cell. In the beginning Myri had been too anxious to sleep, but when too many days went by without anything happening, anxiety started to fade. She started to get lazy. It was too simple to stay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, wondering how Syal or her parents, Jesmin or Piggy or the other Wraiths must be doing. Her little bedroom-cell was big enough to do basic exercise: push-ups, wind-mills, sit-ups on the comfortable white carpet. She'd even started testing her weak legs with lunges. Her body was mending itself, so there was that at least.

She wished someone would give her something to read, even cheap holodramas to watch. Being a prisoner was, above everything else, insufferably boring. She almost wished they would try and torture her, just to break the monotony, but no, *this* renegade fleet was nice and professional and civilized.

Once, when Miranda came to sullenly deliver her lunch, Myri said, "Hey, you got a minute?"

The teenager stood on the other side of the closed door, but Myri could see her feet on the other side of the slot where she slid the tray in. At first she didn't think the girl would answer. Then Miranda said, "Why?"

"I want to talk. It's boring, eating by yourself all the time." Myri said it casually, because it was the truth.

"I'm on duty now," Miranda said pointedly.

"When's your lunch break? You must have one, right?"

After another pause, she said, "Two hours."

"Great. Take that tray and bring it back in two hours."

Miranda didn't say anything. Her boots sat there on the other side of the door for what seemed like a minute before she crouched, reached in, and pulled the tray out. Then the slot on the bottom closed and she walked away.

Myri sighed, laid down on the bed, and watched the ceiling for two hours. By the time Miranda came back, she was getting hungry.

"About time," she said as the door slid open. "I'm starved."

"Everything we say is being watched and recorded," Miranda stood there with a tray balanced in either hand. Myri wondered how she'd opened the lock, then saw the shoulder of a guard peeking over the doorframe. Yes, this was indeed a prison.

"I figured that," Myri said. "I just need to talk to someone. It's been days and I'm getting lonely."

Miranda gave a curt nod and walked into the room. Myri scooted to one side of the bed, and Miranda sat down on the other, leaving an arm's distance between them. They both sat with their trays in their laps and began eating. Myri was a little surprised to see that Miranda was eating the same soup and bread. They must have been giving her standard rations.

"So," Myri said conversationally, "How'd a girl like you end up on a gig like this?"

Miranda looked at her balefully.

"Me, I was on a mission. Top-secret spy stuff."

"You don't look like a spy," Miranda observed.

"Well if I looked like a spy I wouldn't be a very good one, would I?" Myri ran a hand through her red-and-silver hair. "I used to be a gambler, actually. You know, cards and dice."

"And now you work for Alliance intelligence?" Miranda raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"I did until last week, yeah." Myri took a bite out of her bread and chewed noisily. "Though I've got to say, as far as covert ops go, this is pretty impressive. I mean, this ship is pretty nice. Good condition, recent model. How'd you get it?"

"That was the admiral's doing," Miranda said. "He has plenty of connections on Bothawui and beyond. I'm not sure of the specifics."

She might have been lying or she might have been purposely vague. Myri asked, "So like I said, how'd you end up here? You're not old enough to have fought the Vong. You probably don't even remember them."

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"They killed my mother," Miranda said coldly.

"They killed a lot of people's moms."

"I know. And it's not because of that."

"Then why?"

Miranda looked at her half-finished lunch and scowled. Myri decided she would be a pretty girl if she stopped frowning all the time, but so far that was just hypo-thetical.

"This isn't just about getting rid of the Vong. There's a lot of things in the galaxy that need changing. This is just the start. When people see what we've done here, they'll realize what those changes are."

When she didn't continue, Myri asked, "And what would those be?"

"Think of what's happened *since* the Vong War," Miranda said. "A civil war. The disaster on Coruscant. Crazy Jedi killing thousands, millions of beings, then escaping justice."

"Whoa, hey," Myri said. "That's not-"

"My father died in the last war because the people who took over after the one before *that* couldn't get their *poodoo* together."

"Believe me, nobody's going to argue that there's been leadership problems, but Dorvan-"

"Dorvan is just the latest in the same stupid line. Daala, Solo, Omas, all of them incompetent or tyrants," Miranda snarled. Myri had never gone through a political phase when she was a teenager; she guessed this was what one might have looked like. "The only one who *might* have fixed things was Niathal, and she..."

Miranda shook her head and trailed off. She stuffed the last slice of bread in her mouth and chewed.

Myri sighed. "So you ended up on this crazy journey because your parents are dead, and somebody needs to pay? You might not think much of the Jedi, but they've got some smart things to say about revenge."

"This isn't just revenge," Miranda insisted. "This is about justice and building a better future. It's about not letting crimes go unpunished. The Vong are the biggest criminals of all and they got to go off on their paradise-planet because the kriffing self-righteous *Jedi* said we should forgive them."

Myri swallowed and said nothing. Breaking through Miranda's wall of bitterness wasn't something you could do in one conversation.

"So what happens now?" Myri asked. "I haven't heard any explosions, so I'm guessing you haven't found the Vong."

"No." Miranda blinked a little wetness from her eyes.

"What's your strategy? Do you have a map you're following? A tracer? Or are you just sending out probes?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

"But are you privy to that information?" Myri asked. "I'm sorry, I'm just trying to figure out what you *do* on this ship. Besides bring me food, which I'm thankful for, obviously."

"I was an agent," Miranda said softly. "I was supposed to intercept a critical message and bring it to the admiral. But I failed." Her sad face twisted into a snarl. "I failed. The message got stolen by the kriffing Jedi."

"Oh," Myri said, and Miranda made a lot more sense. She looked at the girl with the newfound pity. Bitterness from a traumatic past was wrapped up with self-loathing, leaving no room for pleasures little or small. She often thought her sister Syal had been wrung too tight by her losses and failures. Miranda had been twisted when she was far younger and had had little room to relax and reshape herself into someone happy and healthy.

"I have to go now," Miranda stood, taking her tray in both hands.

"Thanks for stopping by," Myri said gently. "If you want to have lunch again, you know where to find me."

Miranda didn't say anything or look over her shoulder at Myri. She walked out the door and it locked tight behind her, leaving Myri alone once again.

Chapter 4

The dizzying blur of hyperspace suddenly dissolved into stars. The crystalline shell of the ancient Sith vessel's hull faded into translucency, giving its occupants a sudden view in all directions. Vestara Khai rose to her feet to examine the place where her companion, Darth Vidious, had brought them.

As she scanned the space outside of Ship, she saw nothing except a broad field of stars. Her first feeling was of disappointment. She didn't know much about the tattooed Devaronian who stood next to her, other than that he claimed to be part of a league of hidden Sith and at least had the Force skills to back up his claim. She had, however, found herself with the very dim hope that she might, at long last, meet a people who would find her worthy, a people she might in turn find worthy, a people to whom she could *belong*...

Whatever belonging meant, she wasn't going to find it in this empty star field. She turned to Vidious and opened her mouth for a biting comment when the ancient vessel in which she stood spoke directly into her mind.

They are here, Ship said. Through the Force, she felt something like... satisfaction. After all the time she had spent with it, she still didn't know whether to view Ship as a living being, a sophisticated machine, or

something else entirely. Whatever ancient Sith magic had built it and imbued it with something like a mind and Force sensitivity was well beyond her understanding, and that of the Lost Tribe in which she had grown up; a Lost Tribe which was now scattered and dying, haven proven itself and its millennia-nurtured ambitions pathetic against the Jedi order and the machinations of the Force being Abeloth.

They are here, Ship pressed in her mind. *The ones I have been waiting for. Finally, they are here!*

"I sense nothing," Vestara said, both to Ship and to Vidious.

"They are here," the Devaronian echoed Ship's thoughts, intentionally or not. "Can you sense it, Vestara Khai? Can you *feel* the pinpoint of darkness, surrounded by a sea of nothing?"

She didn't want to lie, and she didn't want to admit her weakness, either to Ship or her mysterious guide. She reached out to gently touch the patches over the stump of her left arm. She pressed, gently at first, on the wound left behind by Jaina Solo's lightsaber blade during their encounter on Yavin 4. Even the slightest touch brought pain to the raw wound. She put more pressure on it, and pain stabbed through her shoulders and chest. She bit her lip, blinked away tears, and tried to focus on the pain, draw strength from it.

Good, Lady Khai, Ship said. *Pain makes the Sith strong.*

And as she drew into herself to touch her pain she felt herself spread outward as well, across the cold empty space around her, toward those distant twinkling stars. She sensed emptiness, emptiness for lightyears, an aching emptiness...

And then she felt it, just as they'd said: a tiny, brilliant star of dark side energy, blazing up ahead.

"Amazing," Vestara said and lightened the pressure on the stump of her arm. "What is it?"

A smile spread on Vidious's lips, showing his needle-pointed teeth. "The past, present, and future of the dark side."

Vestara licked a speck of blood from her lip. "I want to see it."

"Don't worry. We're almost there. It seems we were pulled out of a hyperspace a little early by a gravity well. Our allies must be expecting visitors."

"Allies. You've used that term before."

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"It is the best one for them. I'd hardly call us friends."

"I don't feel them in the Force."

"There's no reason you should. Look ahead, Vestara Khai, and witness the beginning of the end for the Jedi."

She released the stump of her arm. She certainly didn't need to focus on her pain anymore; the dark side presence was screaming in her mind. Even when she tried to tune out that presence, she still couldn't find any life signs in the Force.

She watched through Ship's translucent walls. She saw something gleaming ahead, faint in the distant starlight. It was a ship, yes. It was roughly ovoid, with a trio of arm-like extensions jutting both forward and aft. As it drew closer Vestara noticed patches of blackness around it and came to realize that these patches were created by objects in space, objects with rough surfaces that did not catch starlight the same way the ovoid-shaped vessel did.

"Asteroids?" Vestara frowned.

"It's true, then." Vidious chuckled, more amused than condescending. "Your people really *have* been out of the loop."

"What *are* they? I can't find any life in the Force."

"I was younger than you are now when they appeared in the skies of my world," Vidious said. "They rained destruction and death. My family, my friends, my life were stolen from me, leaving nothing but my anger. I was utterly lost until my master taught me how to use that anger to grow strong."

"You mean your leader, the one you won't name?"

Vidious nodded. "Strange. Now they are our *allies*, and I do not hate them."

"Why not?" Vestara asked. "What happened to your anger?"

"Anger is a bridge to strength," Vidious said. "So, too, are the Yuuzhan Vong."

She knew the name, of course. Over the past few years she had traveling the galaxy in exile, speaking to many for whom the Yuuzhan Vong were monsters worse than anything in children's tales, worse because they were real and had killed billions and had been allowed to retreat to some sanctuary because the pompous, self-righteous *Jedi* had insisted on showing mercy to

being who had shown none themselves. There was a galaxy full of people who would run screaming from the monsters that lay ahead.

"That ship." She pointed to the smooth oval. "That is not Yuuzhan Vong."

"That is *our* ship," Vidious said with apparent pride.

"But as I understand it, the Yuuzhan Vong despise artificial technology. How could they allow a ship like that in their presence?" she asked, and suddenly found herself hoping very hard that Ship, her Ship, was 'living' enough to pass the standards of these deadly aliens.

"That is not any ship. We didn't build it. We *found* it."

"And that matters to the Yuuzhan Vong?"

"We found it deep in unknown space. It is a *grown* ship, and organic vessel created thousands of years ago by a race called the Rakata."

Vestara searched her memory. During her time with the Skywalkers, she had learned much about the history of the galaxy, both through conversation and from the encyclopedic database aboard *Jade Shadow*.

"The Rakata ruled an empire a very long time ago," she said. "They... supposedly powered their technology through the dark side of the Force."

Vidious nodded in approval. "They *bred* their vessels to be conduits for the dark, raw energies of the Force."

"And you found one? After all this time?"

"It was not easy," Vidious admitted. "But it is a ship even the Yuuzhan Vong would approve of."

They were getting close to the ships now. The Rakatan oval still shone in the center of the fleet but she could make out well over a dozen rock-like vessels. It was hard to get a sense of scale but some of them dwarfed the Rakatan craft, and all of them dwarfed Ship.

She very, very much hoped they would pass the Vong's standards.

They wish to speak with us, Ship said.

Before Vestara could reply, Vidious said, "Let them."

A moment later, a voice filled Ship's interior. It was a man's voice and sounded old but strong. "Identify yourselves."

"This is Darth Vidious," the Devaronian said. "I bring with me Vestara Khai, formerly of the Lost Tribe of the Sith."

There was a long pause before the voice said, "Welcome back, Lord Vidious. Was your mission successful?"

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"Very much, Lord Nether. Do we have permission to approach?"

"You will be safe. Come and merge your ship with ours."

Ship plunged forward without instruction. It passed one large Yuuzhan Vong vessel, so closely that Vestara could see the deep pockets in its rock-like hull from which, she guessed, it fired its deadly weapons. Ship cut a straight line for the Rakatan ship, but every time a Yuuzhan Vong ship passed close she repressed a shudder.

It seemed terribly *wrong* that these beings could not be felt in the Force at all. Vestara had gotten from explanation from Master Skywalker, something about being stripped of their ability to touch the Force by their sentient home planet, but it had never made sense to her. She wasn't sure it had made sense to the old Jedi either. All she knew was that she felt very, very relieved when Ship moved in to dock with the small stump-like protrusion jutting from the dorsal point of the Rakatan vessel's smooth hull.

She glanced at Vidious. "This ancient Dark Side vessel, does it have a name?"

"According to Darth Nether, who did the most in examining it, the Rakata called it the *Ress'kal/minart*."

"Okay. What does *that* mean?"

Vidious bore his needle-teeth. "Apparently it translates as *Revenge*."

Vestara blew out a breath. "Who were the Rakata getting revenge on?"

"We'll never know." Vidious shrugged as though it were inconsequential, which it probably was. The Rakatan wars were beyond ancient. "Nonetheless, it seems a good omen, don't you think?"

Vestara didn't think she could argue with that. To her surprise, Ship shifted only a little as it docked with *Revenge*. She heard the faint clanking sound of the Rakatan ship's umbilical latching onto the meditation sphere's hull. Then a portal opened like a dilating iris, revealing a long, dark passageway.

"No greeting party?" Vestara asked. They had joined with that bright beacon of dark side energy, and with so much power shining outward it was hard to tell if any individual beings were nearby.

"Not yet, it seems," Vidious shrugged. For a Sith Lord, she thought, he was surprisingly low-energy. But then she thought of him in action on Yavin 4 and banished the impression.

Vidious walked into the umbilical, and Vestara followed. Once she was inside the vessel she could tell that it was, indeed, made from some strange organic technology. The smooth surface of the floor and the ribbed, low arches of the walls glowed faintly with distant lines of glowing light, like luminous blood vessels beneath skin. The sensation was, frankly, very alarming. It felt like she was being swallowed whole by some ancient beast.

They made several curves down the winding corridor before they found themselves in an open, round chamber. The ceiling was low but the walls were spaced apart. At the center of the room stood single being in dark robes, head bowed to hide the face.

Vidious pulled a satchel from his own cloak and raised it high.

"We have prize for Darth Wyyrlok," he said. "We hope it will aid him in healing the leader."

The robed figure looked up. Its face was wide and craggy, with a wide mouth, short nose, and what appeared to be long, flap-like ears pressed against the side of its head by the hood. It opened its eyes and Vestara was jolted to see they were milky and white, suggesting blindness.

"You have brought an ally, Lord Vidious."

"Lady Khai of the Lost Tribe, meet Lord Nether of the One Sith," Vidious said.

"The One Sith," Vestara repeated. "As in one, made of many."

"That is correct." Nether said without smiling, without even inflection. Not a fun one, this Sith Lord.

"Was that your mysterious leader's idea?"

"Our Master is wise in many things."

"When do I get to meet him?"

Vidious chuckled softly. "She is ambitious, Lord Nether. I think she will serve the Sith well."

The old being gestured to the stump of her arm. "Was she serving us when she was wounded so?"

"I was fighting two Jedi at once," Vestara said. "But I don't mourn my wound. It's only pain."

"What do you know of pain, Lady Khai?" Nether asked, finally with a hint of interest.

"I know love is pain," she recited what Ship had told her, on the day she'd lost everything. "And pain makes the Sith strong."

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The skin cracked around the old man's mouth in some semblance of a smile. "Perhaps you will succeed where others have failed."

"It wouldn't be the first time," she said, trying to project confidence she didn't feel.

Darth Nether stared at her for a long moment with those blind white eyes. Whatever he saw in her, or felt in her the Force, he didn't say. He turned and started down another winding hallway. Vidious followed, with Vestara on his heels.

"I noticed our allies have put up an interdiction field," Vidious said conversationally. "Who are they expecting?"

"We have laid a trap," Nether said, not bothering to look over his shoulder. The old man's voice was surprisingly strong. "We have passed information to Aref'ja's renegades in the hopes of drawing them here."

"You wish to destroy their fleet?"

"We mean to fan the flames of war. Their little battle won't do us any good if it stays here in the uncharted regions of space. However, we received no confirmation from Traygo that he successfully passed the message to Aref'ja's agent."

"Strange," Vidious frowned. "He's been a reliable agent in the past."

"Whose idea was it to ally with the Yuuzhan Vong?" Vestara asked. She knew she was being impudent but she felt that Vidious, at least, would indulge a little of that from her, enough to let her make an impression on Nether and whatever other Sith Lords were lurking on this ship. And she was dead certain there were others; Nether alone could not have produced that beacon of dark side energy she'd felt from far away.

"It was a decision from Darth Wyyrlok," Nether said. "He felt that..."

"Lord Nether!" a woman's voice suddenly filled the hallway. It boomed from every direction, and though Vestara craned her neck and searched the walls of this organic corridor she could find no speaker emplacements, no place from which the sound seemed to come.

"What is it?" the old man sounded very alert, almost anxious.

"A fleet of ships has entered the system. Lord Nether, it is not what we expected."

"What do you mean?" Darth Nether snapped. Now he sounded anxious. "If they aren't the renegades, who *are* they?"

The ship rocked violently beneath their feet. Vestara was nearly thrown into a wall, shoulder-stump first, but regained her footing. Nether rushed ahead with impressive speed, while Vidious looked over his shoulder and said to Vestara, "Come to the bridge, Lady Khai. It seems we have some surprise guests that need to be dealt with."

Chapter 5

Captain Fy'lyor of the *Allegiance II*-class Star Destroyer *Justifier* prided herself on an ability to overcome adversity. She was the first Twi'lek and first alien woman to become captain aboard any Imperial vessel, let alone as proud and powerful one like *Justifier*, and she had fought for that privilege with every tooth and claw she had.

The side effect to having hard-wrought accomplishments was a tendency toward paranoia. She was aware of it, and knew it could lead to problems (not to mention a constant, stressful sense of unease) but that wasn't enough to make it go away. Sometimes she was overcome with the fear that the humans on her crew did not trust her judgment. More often she felt her superiors looked down on her as a pretty red-skinned alien, a plaything typically reserved for lecherous Hutts and rich old humans. Mostly, it was when she encountered new people that she felt the urge to prove herself. She'd felt that strongly when she first met Jagged Fel, a man she'd admired from afar for years. She still felt that way now that they were on their second mission together, though she tried to temper her concern with Fel's judgment with her concern for her crew, and this dangerous mission.

She felt a new sort of paranoia, though, with *Justifier's* visitor.

Ben Skywalker looked like a normal young human in his late teens. His hair was messy, his attention seemed to wander, and he dropped into a lazy slouch when he thought nobody was looking. He was also a Jedi Knight, son of possibly the most famous and influential living being in the entire galaxy. Jagged Fel had fostered him on her, supposedly as a way to build bridges between the divided Trinity fleet, but also obviously as a spy.

At least she wasn't stuck with Fel's wife. She didn't envy *Celestial* that 'gift.'

Part of being a good captain was giving guests a good show, which meant that she led him through the entrails of *Justifier* for an hour-long tour. *Justifier* was a new destroyer, a redesign of the decades-old *Allegiance* I-class with improved armaments and hangar capacity, and she only let him see areas that Alliance intel might have known from the original model. He asked questions here and there, mostly about the ship's ability to handle itself in a fight and mostly using the most up-to-date technical jargon. Beneath the lazy exterior he had a sharp mind.

Fy'lyor had never spent any time in the company of Jedi. Like most beings in the galaxy, they were some-thing she saw on holo-news broadcasts, doing outrageous things in exotic far-off places. The Empire, of course, was not a Jedi-friendly place. As far as she knew it did not have a single one in its entire territory. Despite the help the Jedi had given them during the Yuuzhan Vong invasion, they were still typically depicted as errant, dangerous beings with unknowable powers, beholden only to their sectarian interests. Given their recent over-throw of the Daala government, Fy'lyor imagined were plenty of beings in the Alliance who shared that opinion nowadays.

She was aware of the irony of her clinging to old Imperial prejudices, but there it was. She didn't trust Jedi, and never would. *Especially* scruffy teenage boys who were smarter than they acted.

As the tour finished, Fy'lyor took him to the bridge. The boy walked down the central aisle, right up to the forward viewports, and looked out at the Trinity fleet. The dark-gray dagger of *Starless* drifted ahead, flanked by the two small DP20 Corellian gunships, *Viridian* and *Cerulean*. *Justifier's* own support frigates, *Swift* and *Nova Burn*, hung to either side off her forward bow. The sole Chiss vessel, *Celestial*, sat slightly apart from the rest of the fleet.

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"Thank you for the tour," Skywalker said as Fy'lyor came to stand beside him. "You have a good ship. A good crew."

"Does your Force tell you that?" Fy'lyor asked.

"I don't need the Force," Skywalker said. "I can tell by looking."

His flattery was a transparent attempt to earn her favor. She frowned at him. "Tell me, Jedi, what will you do if you are on this ship when she goes into combat?"

"I'll do anything I can to help. We're all in this together, right?"

"But what, specifically?" Fy'lyor gestured to the lightsaber hanging from his belt. "If we are boarded, would you take that up and fight?"

"If I have to," Skywalker nodded.

She studied his blue eyes, his smooth open face. She knew enough about his exploits to know that he had killed many people. He'd gone on raids with his cousin and his government's secret police. His own mother had been murdered by the man he'd once idolized. She thought of her own trials, everything she'd suffered to get to her position of power on *Justifier* and wondered if she'd gone through half of what this boy had in his short life.

"Hopefully it won't come to that," Fy'lyor looked out the viewport. "But we must be ready."

Skywalker stared ahead too. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

He'd asked plenty already, but those were technical things that Jagged Fel probably already knew the answer to. From the tone of his voice, this was different.

"Go ahead," she said in a lowered voice.

"You know Daala's out there, hunting for the Vong, which means she's hunting for *us* too. If we run into her, what will you do?"

"I will complete my mission," Fy'lyor said stiffly. It was a question Fel hadn't asked her at their conference, even though she knew he'd wanted to. Maybe he had told Skywalker to ask it for him, or maybe the boy was asking on his own. It was an obvious question, one she'd asked herself over and over again and hadn't found an answer to.

"They're your fellow Imperials, regardless of what you think about Daala," Skywalker said. "If Jag ordered you to, would you fire on them?"

"Daala is a renegade," Fy'lyor said. "I'd treat her the same as Aref'ja."

Her true feelings for the woman were complicated. She had been a reckless officer, and a disastrous Chief-of-State for the fragile Alliance. At

the same time, Fy'lyor admired the woman's trailblazing determination to succeed in a navy dominated by human men. In her youth she'd looked up to Daala, not because of the specific things she'd done, but for the things she represented to a Twi'lek girl who wanted to put on a uniform and stand on the bridge of an Imperial Star Destroyer.

The same old conflicts were whirling about in her head and she wondered how much of this Skywalker could pick up through his mysterious Force powers. She'd learned how to hide her feelings from normal beings well, but as Skywalker regarded her with those cool blue eyes he wondered if the boy was somehow staring deep into her soul, seeing things about herself that even she didn't know.

Whatever he saw, he kept it to himself. He turned his attention back to the viewport and watched *Starless* drift a little further ahead. Finally, he said, "I'd like to see my quarters now."

Fy'lyor called one of her lieutenants and had him escort the Jedi away. When he left the bridge she let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She noticed muted relief on the faces of some of her crew members, and that made her feel better. It made her feel like she belonged.

Jag had given Jaina a run-down of what to expect when she boarded *Celestial*, the Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet's sole contribution to Task Force Trinity. It was a sleek vessel, about the size of *Starless* and with a similarly dark hull, though *Celestial* had elegant curves instead of sharp edges.

Inside, it was as predicted: everything cool and gray, its officers working with a mechanical precision that would have made the most martinet Imperial envious. When she reached out with the Force she sensed no strong emotion from them, only the professional control she'd come to expect from Chiss.

Her sister-in-law, however, was another case.

Wynssa did not give her much of a tour when she arrived on *Celestial*. She took Jaina from the docking bay to the bridge, then from the bridge to her quarters, and finally back from quarters to landing bay. The keycard she was issued accessed only those specific hallways. She was to be followed by an observer at all times. Wynssa was plainly making an

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effort to make Jaina feel as unwelcome as possible. Certainly she made no overtures of familiar affection.

Still, Jaina couldn't say she was surprised by any of it, so she did her best to observe and not make a fuss. Seven hours after she arrived on *Celestial*, the fleet was scheduled to investigate the coordinates specified in the data-disk Ben and Tahiri had recovered on Tatooine.

The fleet gathered on the edge of a system unnamed in Alliance databases and marked by the Chiss only as 439-X3. The coordinates marked an empty space, far distant from any star or planetoid, so whatever it was, Jaina doubted it was Zonama Sekot. It was entirely possible that there was some Sith outpost here, or maybe a base for the renegade fleet, which was why a pair of reconnaissance X-wings were going to jump one parsec away from the coordinates for a thorough scan.

Because the X-wings would be launching from *Starless*, Jaina and Wynssa had nothing to do on the bridge of *Celestial* except stand on deck and wait. All ships were standing by on yellow alert until the X-wings reported safely back in. According to Jag, it had been Syal Antilles and Voort SaBinring who had worked out the reconnaissance plan. Clearly, the loss of Syal's sister was a fresh wound for both.

As she stood on the bridge of *Celestial*, watching the red-eyed, blue-skinned Chiss work their stations with methodical precision, she wanted to ask Wynssa about old wounds, the kind that scabbed over and left ugly scars in their place. She'd talked before with Jagged about what it was like to lose a sibling; indeed, he'd helped her work through her grief after Jacen's death by recounting his own memories of the brothers and sisters he'd lost. Despite his cool and controlled exterior, Jag was a man who felt things deeply, and Jaina felt the same must be true for Wynssa, even if the blond woman acted just as methodically as her crew.

During a quiet moment, when there was little to do except watch the dark gray dagger of *Starless* and the light gray wedge of the carrier *Corusca Gem* drift across space, Jaina sidled next to her sister-in-law and said, "You have a very good crew."

"Of course," Wynssa said, watching the ships ahead and not her. "They are all graduates from the Chiss Naval Academy."

"They work well together," Jaina said. She didn't know where she was going with this, but she figured compliments might be a good way to break the ice. "And they respect you."

"We are *all* Chiss," Wynssa said plainly. "We're trained to respect the chain of command and obey our superiors, not rebel and countermand orders left and right. Your people should try it."

So much for breaking the ice. It took all of Jaina's effort not to wince. "That was uncalled for."

"Perhaps." Wynssa stared out the viewport, refusing eye contact. "This ship works because every man and woman knows his or her function and acts it out accordingly. What is *your* function, Solo? Did my brother send you as an advisor? A spy?"

"He explained his reasoning already. "He wants Jedi on Alliance, Imperial, *and* Chiss ships so that the task force works as a more cohesive unit. This is for everyone's benefit."

"So spies *and* advisors."

"Call it what you want." Jaina put on a cold smile. She could do icy too. "If it's any consolation, I doubt Red over on *Justifier* is any more pleased about this than you are."

"That's quite likely," Wynssa said. She finally glanced sidelong at Jaina and their eyes met. Those eyes were pure Jag, dark blue and intense. "I understand what my brother was trying to do, but he could have chosen better methods. He knows we Chiss like our privacy. And while I'm sure you Jedi think yourselves noble, you are not the most popular people in the galaxy right now."

Jaina could have said a lot of things there, but instead she took a deep breath and said, "We've only tried to do what was right."

"Of course," Wynssa looked back out the viewport. "I'm sure your brother did too."

Jaina smacked her before she could think. The sharp slap seemed to ricochet across the bridge. Three dozen red pairs of eyes turned to them. Wynssa froze, one hand on her cheek, cold blue eyes suddenly hot with anger. A pair of security guards started across the bridge but Wynssa held up a hand.

"To your posts!" she snapped, revealing her cheek. The red burn was quickly fading.

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"I'm sorry," Jaina said, shocked and ashamed by her actions. She was a Jedi and a former military officer; she thought she should have had more discipline. "That was uncalled for. I'll return to my quarters."

"Perhaps you should," Wynssa scowled.

Jaina stepped in close enough to feel the pulse of Wynssa's breath. With quiet ferocity she said, "Listen, you might blame me for taking Jag away from a perfect, orderly Chiss kind of life, but it was *his* choice and nobody else's."

"I am aware of that." Wynssa said bitterly.

"And you may not like Jedi either. Lots of people don't and maybe some of that is our fault. But do not make this about Jacen. Don't *ever* mention my brother again."

"I will not," Wynssa said. Jaina could feel her indig-nation mix with fear in the Force.

"Good," Jaina turned and headed for the exit. She felt three dozen red pairs of eyes on her back and tried to forget about them. What she'd done hadn't been Jedi-like, it certainly hadn't been diplomatic, and Jag would throw a fit when he found out, but she still felt that for her comment about Jacen, Wynssa deserved a bit of hurt.

As the door closed behind her, someone announced, "Recon X-wings away."

It was a short jump, and the luminous blur of hyperspace reverted to starlight as quickly as it had begun. There were no planets at these coordinates, no nearby sun, no asteroids, and- a preliminary sensor sweep confirmed it- no ships either. Jesmin released a breath she hadn't known she was holding.

"My preliminary scans show negative, Ranger. What about yours?" Voort's mechanical voice sounded extra-harsh over Jesmin's headset, but to her it was still the comforting voice of 'Uncle Piggy,' who'd bounced her on his fat belly a long time ago. She was glad he'd volunteered to fly her wing.

"I have negative too, Lead," she said. "Commencing survey for bio-signs."

"Copy. Scan for trace minerals underway."

Jesmin pointed the nose of her matte-black StealthX toward the coordinates supplied by the Jedi. There was nothing visible one parsec ahead

except for blackness and starlight, but her long-range sensor probe would be able to pick up any bio-signs before they were visible with the naked eye.

Jesmin was unspeakably grateful not to have jumped into another firefight, but she was also a little confused and disappointed. The coordinates the Jedi provided were supposed to be their big lead; without them, Task Force Trinity might end up wandering the Unknown Regions for months without finding a trace of either the renegades or the Vong. When you were within the well-charted borders of the Alliance you forgot just how vast the galaxy was, and how many countless star systems were full of scattered rock and lifeless planets.

Jesmin watched the scans run through her cockpit display. She reported, "No bio-signs, but I'm picking up carbon, hydrogen... There's definitely organic residue."

"Lead here," Voort said. "I'm picking up metallic elements too. No electronic signatures. Faint ion residue, though."

"*Starless* here, Wraith Lead," Jagged Fel's clipped voice sounded in her headset. "Do you think you're looking at wreckage?"

"Possibly, *Starless*. We'll need to get closer before we can tell. Give us a few minutes."

"Copy. Standing by."

There was a click as Fel closed the comlink. When she was sure he had nothing more to say, Jesmin flipped onto a private channel with Voort.

"Lead, what do you think we've got ahead?"

"I can't tell, but I have a feeling it might be cold left-overs from a battle."

"Well, better than hot ones."

"Agreed."

Jesmin hesitated, then added, "Thanks for flying my wing, Lead."

"Don't mention it, Ranger."

Jesmin smiled a little, and when Voort said nothing more, switched her comlink back to broadband. Of all the Wraiths, they had known Myri the longest and her death had hit them the hardest. It wasn't the way she wanted to re-bond with 'Uncle Piggy' after not seeing him for over ten years, but it was good to have a bond all the same. It was good to be tethered to someone, and something.

They flew in silence for a few more minutes. More data began to trickle in through her sensors, but Jesmin still couldn't see anything up ahead. That

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was a comfort, because it meant that whatever lay ahead was dark and dead and wouldn't suddenly start shooting at them.

"Starting to get composite analysis," Voort reported. "I'm getting some steel alloys... Definitely ion and fusial thrust residue... Lots of diluted plasma too."

Fel asked, "Any guess how long ago the battle was, Wraith Lead?"

"Dispersal patterns are hard to measure, but I'd guess less than two standard days."

"What about ship profiles?"

"Scanning those now... The computer's having a difficult time."

"What about organic scans, Ranger?"

Jesmin's eyes flicked back and forth between her computer read-out and the blackness ahead. She still couldn't see any signs of ships or wreckage. "Nothing new, *Starless*, but I'm definitely picking up heavy organic elements, so I'd bet... Wait. I'm getting match for yorik coral."

"Bio-signs still reading negative."

"Negative," Jesmin said, then added, "I mean, positive. No life signs."

"Very good, Ranger. Keep scanning."

Jesmin fought back a curse. She was getting jittery, not thinking straight. The memory of her X-wing breaking into flames around her, and the dizzying burst of her ejection into the fray, came back to her suddenly. Compared to the aching pain of Myri's death, it was a sharper hurt, and harder to push out of her thoughts.

"Lead is entering visual range," Voort said. "Ranger, do you see any ships yet?"

"Negative, Lead," Jesmin said. She squinted at the darkness ahead and thought she saw a few stars wink in and out, perhaps occluded by passing debris. "Wait, I think I might have something."

"*Starless*, I'm trying to get a make on some of the ship wreckage. Definitely some non-organic material, but I can't get a model or manufacture."

"Live-transmit your data to us, Lead," Fel said. "We'll run it through our computers."

"Copy. Transmitting now."

"Ranger here," Jesmin said. Her lips were dry and her throat cracked a little. "Transmitting too. Looks like I'm making a couple YV frigate-analogs."

That was what her computer told her, anyway. The Vong's organic ships were notoriously hard to classify, and Jesmin had only seen them briefly while spinning through space in her evac suit.

By now they were close enough to get a good visual on the wreckage. There had, indeed, been a massive battle here. Chunks of yorik coral drifted lazily through space alongside torn and twisted chunks of metal. Jesmin tried to identify any of the non-organic wreckage but was unsuccessful. Even one larger vessel, maybe the size of a Corellian corvette and relatively intact, was nothing she'd seen before.

"Ranger here. These ships don't match anything I'm familiar with. Might be something local."

"Copy, Ranger," Fel said. "*Celestial*, we're sending you Lead's data-stream now. See if you can run these ships through your database."

"Copy, *Starless*," came a cool Chiss voice. "Receiving now."

Now that she was in the middle of the debris field, Jesmin paid more attention to her flying than the continual stream of analysis running down her screen. It was all being fed back to the fleet anyhow, so her best choice was to concentrate on not hitting all the twisted metal and yorik coral floating around. The red afterburn from Voort's X-wing glared in the corner of her vision.

Some short time later, Wynssa Fel's voice came back over the headset. "*Celestial*/here. Analysis still ongoing, but we believe these ships belong to the Tylonians."

"Never heard of them," Jesmin muttered, realizing too late she'd spoken aloud.

"They are, as suggested, *local*," Wynssa Fel said. "We've had military encounters with them in the past. It appears they stumbled on the Vong camped at these coordinates."

"Possible, *Celestial*, but let's not jump to conclusions," Jagged Fel told his sister. "Recon team, any guess as to who got the upper hand in this battle?"

"It's a good mix of debris, *Starless*," Voort said. "But it looks like there's more Tylonian than Vong."

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"Ranger agrees," Jesmin said. "Their ships are pretty well smashed, but the Vong lost at least two frigates."

"The Tylonians are capable fighters," Wynssa said.

"So are the Vong," Jagged reminded. "Recon flight, you did well. Get to the edge of the debris field. We're going to jump in to join you. Then we can do a full analysis of the debris."

"Copy, *Starless*," Voort said. "We'll be waiting."

He kicked in the burn on his engines, and Jesmin followed his red trail around the floating corpse of the Vong frigate and out of the thick debris field. She sidled her fighter up to Voort's and the two made a broad turn to circle the debris.

Jesmin flicked her comlink to a private channel and said, "Glad it was easy this time, Lead."

"Agreed," Voort said.

"Thanks for having my wing, again."

"Thanks for having mine, Ranger. I know it couldn't be easy to do this again."

It hadn't been, but she'd done it anyway. She still wasn't sure why her hand had shot up when Voort asked for volunteers. Maybe she had to prove to herself that she wasn't afraid, that she wasn't running, that she intended to stick to her duty after abandoning so many others.

"No problem," she said after a moment's thought. "Just doing my job."

As they wheeled closer to the debris, the first ships began to drop out of hyperspace. The Imperials came first, with the massive star destroyer *Justifier* in the lead, followed by the relatively smaller *Vindicator*, then two *Lancer*-class anti-starfighter frigates.

The Alliance ships reverted behind them, close enough for Jesmin to mark with her eyes. The carrier *Endurance*-class *Corusca Gem* appeared side-by-side with *Mon Dromeda*, a frigate-sized MC60i Mon Cal cruiser bulging with a pair of gravity well generators. Behind them appeared *Starless*, her dark gray hull gliding elegantly through dark space. The refitted Imperial destroyer *Liberty Star* brought up the rear. Jesmin and Voort kicked their X-wings forward toward the flagship.

There was the bright light of an explosion, and Jesmin pulled her fighter up. She still wasn't totally used to the StealthX's controls and, after a sluggish

turn, found herself buffeted by the force from an explosion. Debris peppered her shields, causing no damage but sounding proximity alarms.

"Fierfek!" Jesmin swore, "What was that? Lead, you there? Lead, report!"

"Lead here," Voort's voice crackled on her headset. "Looks like one of those Vong frigates just cracked open!"

"This is *Starless*!" Jag Fel barked. "Recon flight, get out of there! We've got ships coming out of the frigate, unidentified-"

"They're Tylonian drones," Wynssa Fel interrupted. "Unmanned droid fighters. They were hiding in the frigate. We're also picking up a ship, corvette-size, trying to escape."

"*Justifier* is launching fighter screen," came a voice from the Imperial destroyer.

"*Gem* is launching too," said someone from the carrier. "Knave Squadron away. Katarn Squadron away."

"Tell them to contain the drones but do not engage," Wynssa said. "Our pilots are trained to combat Tylonians. They'll handle the small ships. Stop the shuttle."

"*Mon Dromeda* is powering gravity wells," said a gravelly voice from the interdicator.

Jagged Fel started saying something, then his sister said something too, then *Myri's* sister, and then the Mon Cal captain again, everyone squawking at once as the drones swarmed in front of Jesmin's ship like frenzied flitgnats. StealthX fighters were as well-armed as standard X-wings, but her targeting computer failed to lock onto the Tylonian ship. There was no way to get past them except to dive into the swarm and pray.

Despite the chaos everything seemed to slow down. All the noise turned to white nothing and Jesmin thought: *I wonder if it was like this for Myri too.*

Then everything lit up with green laser blasts. The drones burst into a rain of flame and molten metal and a squadron of TIE Interceptors roared across Jesmin's field of vision.

"Borosk Lead to Recon group," one of the Imperial pilots said, "You're clear. Head home."

Jesmin was too stunned and relieved to speak. Voort's mechanical voice said everything: "Thanks, Lead, and good flying. Recon group out."

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Jesmin kicked in her engines and followed Voort. More drones swarmed behind her, but a full squadron of Chiss Clawcraft were racing to meet them, guns already blazing.

"Recon flight is clear," someone reported from the navigation station on *Starless's* bridge.

Syal allowed herself a small sigh of relief as she watched two green markers break through the chaos on the bridge's tactical hologram. Dozens of Imperial, Chiss, and Alliance starfighters were diving into the fray, but she was simply glad not to lose Piggy today.

This was exactly the kind of situation Syal had dreaded when taking on her current role. She'd expected to join this mission as an advisor, not as captain of its flagship, and in truth she'd felt pressured by Garik Loran into taking his offer. She'd had her own ship at Fondor but *Watchkeeper* had been a mere patrol frigate, not a top-of-the-line destroyer.

Jagged Fel was standing next to her, watching the holo with a look of studious concentration. Either he didn't feel the same panic Syal did, or he was better at hiding it. She couldn't tell; she still didn't know her cousin very well. On the other side of the holo stood Traest Kre'fey and Tahiri Veila, silent observers without official rank but clearly with thoughts of their own. The ex-admiral in particular looked like he was on the verge of barking out orders.

Someone else from navigation said, "Two more big ships just broke out of that frigate. Look like cargo shuttles. They're catching up with the corvette."

"Where are those gravity wells?" Syal asked.

"Coming online now, Captain," someone from the communications station reported. As if on cue, the entire deck shook slightly as the internal gravity compensated for *Mon Dromeda's* additional pull.

"Those ships aren't going anywhere," Jagged said. "Get me *Celestial*, personal comm."

After a second, Wynssa Fel's voice crackled over Jagged's hand-held communications relay. Her voice was small and tinny against the clamor of the bridge, and Syal stepped closer to hear it. She said, "This is *Celestial*. What is it, *Starless*?"

"How are your fighters doing?"

"We're containing the drones as best we can. Your fighter screens are keeping them penned in."

"What about the big ships? Can you communicate with them?"

There was a pause, short but noticeable. Wynssa said, "We can attempt it."

"Tell them they have no place to go and must surrender. If they don't, they'll be fired upon. Is that clear?"

"Affirmative. We will try."

"That's all I ask," Jagged said and flicked the comm off. He spun toward the tactical console and said, "Tell Knave and Torch Squadrons to go after those big ships. Disable their engines if possible, but do *not* shoot to kill."

"Copy, sir," the tactical lieutenant said.

Syal shook her head. "Those ships are a strange design. Our pilots might blow them up by accident."

"I know." Fett blew a deep breath and looked at the three people gathered around the holo. "If you have advice to give, the time is now."

"Those ships probably don't even know what we are," Tahiri said. "They probably survived the Vong attack and hid. They might not even *have* hyperdrive. They probably saw new ships come, panicked, and ran."

"Agreed," Kre'fey said. "The only ships they recognize here are Chiss-"

"-And they clearly have bad history with them," Syal told Jag. "We have to assume they'll behave as hostiles and act accordingly."

"Sir!" someone from tactical called, "Those ships have changed course!"

"Heading?" Syal demanded.

"They're going... right for *Mon Dromeda*."

"They're going to try and take her down," Syal told Jagged. "We have to protect her."

"Where are Knave and Torch squads?" Jagged asked, still cool, still concentrated.

"They're coming up behind the ships now, sir," Tactical reported. "They're... One's hit. Two's hit. Repeat, two Torches are down. Those ships have guns all right."

"Did the pilots go EV?" Syal asked.

"Can't tell, Captain. Not getting any beacons."

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Two more pilots dead, two more families grieving, and more to go if those ships damaged *Mon Dromeda*. If the interdicator was lost entirely, it could cripple the whole mission.

"We *have* to protect that cruiser," Syal told Jag. "Call in *Viridian* or *Cerulean*. Destroy those ships!"

"Those gunships are part of the fighter screen," Kre'fey reminded her.

"We *have* to protect *Mon Dromeda*!" Syal insisted. She was stunned that Kre'fey, veteran commander and tactician, would be willing to surrender the most important ship in the fleet. "We need to blow those ships out before we lose anyone else!"

Kre'fey reached out with one white paw and poked a claw at the holo-marker for *Corusca Gem*. "Move her in close. She can protect *Mon Dromeda*."

"She's a *carrier*, not a gunship," Syal said. "She can't get there in time."

Something lit up in Fel's eyes. He turned and barked to the tactical station, "Tell Captain Pavric to move in close to *Mon Dromeda*. I want her to intercept those ships. Tell Knave and Torch to pull back."

"Sir?" Syal gaped. "Those ships, they're-"

"Increasing speed," Kre'fey observed, jabbing the holo again with his claw. "I bet those smaller ships will attempt to ram so the big one can get through."

Syal spun on Jagged. "Sir, we have to shoot them down! Now! *Gem* doesn't have the precision firing to-"

"Shut it, Captain," Jag snapped, harsher than she'd heard him before.

He was staring intently at the holo, as were Kre'fey and Tahiri. Syal, stunned and speechless, had no choice but to watch, too as *Corusca Gem* came in on top of *Mon Dromeda*. The fleeing ships were right on top of the interdicator too, moving fast, when suddenly all three ships froze in place. Suddenly their red markers started flashing, alternately red and blue, and Jag and Kre'fey breathed sighs of relief in unison.

"Message from Captain Pavric, sir," the communications station said. "They've got all three. Reeling them in now."

"Excellent," Jag said. "What about those drones?"

"Chiss are making good work of them," the tactical lieutenant reported.

"Good. Send a request to *Celestial* that those clutches pull out. Our gunships and lancers can finish off the stragglers."

"Copy that, sir."

Syal stared around the bridge in confusion. Jagged looked almost happy, Kre'fey satisfied, Tahiri relieved; the other crew members were allowing tentative smiles on their faces.

"S-Sir," Syal said, facing her commander, "I don't understand."

It was Kre'fey who spoke. "*Gem* might not have precision targeting, but as a carrier, she *does* have six tractor beams that can work independently. Once the targets were tractored, three ion blasts were all it took."

It made perfect sense, but in the heat of battle Syal had completely forgotten the carrier's capabilities. She flushed, bit her lip, and turned shameful eyes to her commander. "I'm sorry, sir. I shouldn't have tried to countermand your orders."

"You shouldn't have, Captain," her cousin said severely. "Remember that your position is captain of *Starless*, not commander of this fleet."

"Of course, sir. I'm sorry," Syal swallowed. "I was only thinking about saving lives."

Jagged's expression softened, but only a little. "So was I, Captain. Today, the lives on those ships were more important than those of our pilots. Do you understand?"

"I do, sir."

"Good." Jagged looked away from Syal. "Tahiri, with me. Let's get on the line and talk to Captain Pavric."

"Great," the blond woman said. "Thinks her boarding teams can handle some Tylonians?"

"They will once I tell them how. It turns out Tylonians are very susceptible to a certain easily-produced nerve agent, completely harmless to most beings..."

Jagged and Tahiri made for the communications station. She they walked Tahiri laughed, like Jag was cracking a joke. Syal watched their backs and felt her hands ball into frustrated fists.

Suddenly Kre'fey was at her side. The Bothan said softly, "Don't take it badly. Those two are nearly family."

Jagged *was* her family, Syal thought, but he was still a stranger. That shouldn't have been surprising, though; her sister had been nearly a stranger too. At least with Jagged there was still the possibility of making amends, though so far she clearly hadn't been doing a good job of it.

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"I panicked," she admitted, not quite willing to meet the Bothan's violet eyes. "After those fighters were destroyed, I wasn't thinking clearly."

"Keeping a level head is an important part of command," Kre'fey said. She could tell he was trying to be helpful, an old warrior giving advice to a young one, but she it only made her feel more ashamed.

"I know that," she said. "I was better at it once."

She did her best to study the tactical hologram. The gunships and lancers were pouring in laser fire, tearing up the remaining drones. They were still tiny nimble things, and unless they could be shut down from the Tylonian ships they could continue to harass Trinity Fleet for hours or even days. It would be a messy clean-up operation, but at least the main fight had ended quickly and with minimal casualties.

Seemingly out of nothing, Kre'fey asked, "Do you want revenge for your sister?"

Syal jerked her attention away from the holo and looked right into those violet gold-flecked eyes. "What do you mean?"

"It's a simple question." Kre'fey said evenly.

"I don't want any more people to die," Syal said. "I don't want any more sisters or brothers or sons or daughters to die."

"They're going to. Before this fight is over, you're going to send many more of them to their deaths. You realize that don't you?"

Syal swallowed. She knew it intellectually. It was a requirement of command, and in her training she'd had that drilled into her head: *you are going to get people killed*. She had accepted that in the abstract, but things were suddenly different, now that she knew how the pain of loss felt. She wondered if this was why her father had resisted a command position for so long. When you were in a snubfighter, all you had to worry about was you and your eleven squadmates, not thousands of pilots, soldiers, technicians, and officers.

"I'll do what I have to do to complete this mission," Syal said.

"Does completion entail revenge against the Vong, or Bren's fleet?"

"I want to end this with as little death as possible, sir. If we can reach some kind of truce with Aref'ja, or even the Vong, I'll take it."

"You're wiser than I was at your age," Kre'fey said. His fur rippled, like some unwelcome thought was shaking his body. "Remember that there are many lives that need saving, not just those under your command."

"Of course, Admiral."

"I'm not an Admiral anymore," Kre'fey smiled sadly, "Just a tired old Bothan."

Syal allowed a smile in return. "That's okay. I'm tired too."

Kre'fey reached out and put a white paw on her shoulder. "Then you should get a little rest now while your *real* commanding officer figures out what to do with our new friends. Because once he does, I have a feeling things are going to happen very fast, and every one of us will have to be ready."

Chapter 6

Boba Fett embarked on a journey to the Unknown Regions feeling more anxious than he ever had in a long and turbulent life.

As much as he tried to fight it, he felt hopeful. Drikl Lecersen might have been a scheming piece of *osik* but if anyone had the resources to undo the nano-virus that prevented him or anyone with Fett genes from stepping foot on Mandalore, it was him. After all, he'd help cook up the damned thing.

Fett felt suspicious, naturally. He didn't trust Lecersen and, as much as he liked Natasi Daala, he didn't trust her either. Fierfek, that might have been *why* he liked her, or at least part of it. She was driven and ruthless, a fighter through and through, and she never let something like mushy affection get in the way of whatever goal she set herself toward.

He felt fear, too. Fear was an emotion he'd always had, but long ago learned to tune down so he didn't have to pay attention to it. Now, though, he couldn't get his memory off the time that sleazy Vong agent Nom Anor had taken him and Goran Beviin's men aboard his Yuuzhan Vong cruiser to brag about their terrifying biotechnology. Fett had been scared then, because he'd finally found something that could grind all his other enemies- Imps, Rebels, Hutts, the list went on forever- to dust. Fett was a man who

looked out for himself first and foremost, always had, but he knew that if the Vong came roaring out of the Unknown Regions, there'd be no hiding.

Finally, he felt very alone, despite being in command of two dozen Mando warriors. *Mand'alor* or not, he'd never felt a part of their nomadic warrior culture. It was all based on family bonds, camaraderie, and fire-forged friendship, and Fett had spent his life trusting no one and working alone unless absolutely required. It didn't help that most of those warriors were members of the Skirata Clan.

Over sixty years ago, a group of malfunctioning clone commandos had deserted the Republic-turned-Empire, settled on Mandalore, and gone full Mando. Their Jango Fett genes were as vulnerable to Lecersen's nano-killers as Boba Fett's own, which meant they were left roaming the stars, just like him. They were clannish in the extreme, hardcore Mandos who'd spent their lives resenting the absent *Mand'alor* just as he'd resented the title thrust on him by birth. And now they were stuck together, brothers in exile.

The past four years had been a strange sort of wandering. He was a king who couldn't set foot in his castle, and for the first time in his life, he *wanted* to be in that castle. He wasn't ready to embrace the back-slapping blood-brother Mando mindset yet, but he'd found things to appreciate in them. They were fine, fine soldiers, the kind people paid good money for. That was a big part of it. But, beneath that, he felt at home on Mandalore in a way he never really had before in a long, lonely existence drifting through the stars, hunting and killing for every meal. Maybe he was just getting old and wanted a quiet place to take off his helmet. Maybe it made him feel closer to his father.

Maybe he wanted to do something for someone other than himself for once.

Either way, it didn't matter now. He couldn't go home. Beviin ran the shop in his place and was frankly doing a better job of it than Fett himself ever could have, but still Boba Fett was *Mand'alor* and there was nothing he could do about it.

For a people who said family was more than blood, they could never let Boba Fett forget his. Unfortunately, he couldn't let go of it either.

The Mandalorians had their own space set aside on *Chimaera*, which wasn't difficult, since Thrawn's old flagship was operation at two-thirds of a full crew complement. Partially that was because of some auto-mated

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systems Daala had installed during her last tenure on *Chimaera's* bridge, but all the other ships in Daala's ragtag fleet were operating below optimal staff. It was a fleet she'd thrown together on short notice and it showed, inside and out. Ancient *Chimaera* was right at home alongside a Clone Wars-era *Venator*-class cruiser, another *Imperial II*-model destroyer nearly as old as *Chimaera* called *Resolve*, an interdictor cruiser called *Repulse*, two lancer frigates, and a trio of retrofitted little *Marauder*-class corvettes.

Of course, none of those ancient ships were older than Fett himself. It was important to keep *that* in mind.

The Mandalorians had space enough to sleep, exercise, and eat and drink in their personal cafeteria on *Chimaera*. Rations were not up to par with food grown-and-cooked on Mandalore, but a being had to take what was given. The Skirata Clan dominated every room they were in, but most other Mandos like Baltan Carid had no difficulty fitting in.

Fett preferred to spend his time alone or going over intelligence and battle plans with Admiral Daala. He was in the admiral's quarters one afternoon when her personal comlink chimed. Daala, suddenly all-business, brought the device to her lips and said, "This is the admiral. Report."

"Natasi, there's something you should see." Fett immediately recognized the voice as Drikl Lecersen's. He didn't think the two of them were on first-name basis and, from the look on Daala's face, he was doing it to get a rise out of her.

"Be more specific, *Drikl*," Daala said coldly.

"*Halberd* just came back from advanced scouting. They say they picked up an unmanned probe."

"A probe?" Daala frowned. "Can you identify the make?"

"*Halberd* is sending it over to us for investigation. I'm heading to the secondary landing bay now."

"I'll meet you there." Daala shot to her feet. She looked down at Fett, still seated on the sofa, and asked, "Coming?"

Fett put on his helmet and followed her without a word.

It took a good ten minutes to get from the admiral's quarters to the forward landing bay. Unlike the main one, which was now stocked with assault shuttles, TIE fighters, and Mandalorian *besu'liike* starfighters, the forward bay held nothing except for one cargo shuttle, freshly arrived. Its coolant jets were still spurting air when Fett and Daala arrived. Lecersen

was already there, a dozen stormtroopers in tow. He didn't need the troops for any reason Fett could see, aside from putting on a show for Daala.

Daala being Daala, she didn't give him the satisfaction of acting provoked by his show of authority. She smiled her cool, polite smile and asked, "Have they offloaded the probe yet?"

"No, Admiral," Lecersen said. "At the moment it's secured in the cargo bay. A security team is on its way, however, and will examine the probe for booby-traps before we begin a more thorough examination."

"Very good of you." Daala nodded slightly.

"I was just doing my job, Admiral," Lecersen smiled a little. He probably didn't dare call her 'Natasi' to her face.

"How did *Halberd* find the probe?" Daala asked as a trio of black-clad inspectors appeared from the starboard turbolift.

"It was apparently in orbit around a gas giant in the XC-780 system," Lecersen said. "The thrust engines were active and it appeared to be transmitting."

"Is it a long-range probe?"

"Uncertain, but there were no other ships in-system."

Fett watched as the security team went around to the side entrance and boarded the cargo shuttle. Daala crossed her arms over her chest and asked, "Was it able to send out a distress signal before we captured it?"

"Unknown. *Halberd* hit it with an ion blast from a distance, barely within range of acting sensors, so even if it did, it probably wasn't much."

"It's a *probe*," Fett said gruffly. "It's sure to have better sensors than an old Marauder corvette."

"Just so," Lecersen cleared his throat. "*Halberd* didn't pick up any outgoing long-range transmissions."

A minute later, the security chief stepped out of the shuttle and gave an all-clear hand signal. Daala stepped forward eagerly, Fett and Lecersen right behind her.

The cargo shuttle's main chamber was some ten meters long, and the probe took up most of it. It was long and narrow, with a needle-like point and an aft section that fanned out in a set of three dual thrust engines. Fett thought he recognized the design, and ran a sensor sweep to be positive. Sure enough, the information on his heads-up display confirmed it.

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"Incom DX-4," Fett said aloud. "Pretty new model. Hyperspace-capable. Sold on the civilian market, usually bought by astro-navigation companies and university research departments."

Another being might have acted impressed, but Daala took it in with a curt nod. "Can you tell if it's been modified?"

"We know it has no explosive charges," Lecersen said.

"Its sensors might have been modified to detect things *besides* astronomical phenomenon." Daala said. "Ship data, for example."

"Probably belongs to the renegade fleet," Fett said. "Whatever the Alliance sends is going to be using military hardware, top-secret specs and all that. The renegades could buy a bunch of these on the private market and nobody would bat an eye."

"If it's a civilian model, it should be relatively easy to decrypt the data," Lecersen said. "I'll have my technicians get on it right away."

"*Unless* they modified its systems," Daala said, and let her gaze meaningfully drift over to Fett. "Then we might need some expert slicers. Do you think we have any aboard, Fett?"

"I assure you, Admiral, my people are top-of-the-line," Lecersen was firm but indignant. "They *were* the ones who found out about the Vong in the first place."

"I remember. But they might need a helping hand." Daala kept her eyes on Fett. "Tell me, do your Mandos do anything besides shoot things, belch, and scratch themselves all day?"

"We have some slicers," Fett said. "Very good ones." Daala knew that, of course; he'd run over his entire roster of soldiers with her at the start of the mission.

"Very good," Daala nodded. Her lips formed a tight, satisfied smile. "Please send some to assist Moff Lecersen's men."

"I assure you," Lecersen protested, "This really isn't necessary-"

"My ship, my rules, *Drik!*" Daala's head whipped to glare at him.

"Of course, Admiral. We'll see whether my men or the... mercenaries crack the data first." Lecersen surrendered, uncowed.

"Excellent." Daala clapped her hands together. "Get to work. If this probe sent out a distress beacon, we may have only a short window of time to work with. Go. *Now.*"

And with that, Fett headed back to the barracks for a conversation he really didn't want to have.

When he got close to the room the Mandalorians were using as a mess hall, he heard them before he saw them. The garrulous Mando nature might have been one of the things Fett found most alien about them. He's learned early on to talk little and say even less. If he'd grown up as part of some huge, happy warrior family it might have been different, but he'd grown up with no family at all, and nothing would ever change that.

He knew he'd find no family here, even as he stepped through the door and saw a dozen variations of his own face staring back at him.

He took in the scene with the lightning-fast observation that had made him the galaxy's best bounty hunter. There was Dinua Jeban, out of armor, standing by the counter with a cup of caf in one hand, talking to a man (yes armor, no helmet) with Fett's own features smoothed by age and softened by blue eyes and paler skin. That was Jendri Skirata. From his smile and posture, he probably didn't know that Dinua had a husband and two kids on Mandalore.

Seated at the table was Jendri's sister, Bess. She was talking to her great-uncle Jaing. The old clone was out of his armor and had one foot wrapped in a cast and propped up on a chair. Across the table was another ancient, Mereel, who looked just like a derelict version of Jaing, complete with scruffy beard and long gray hair bound into braids that hung on his shoulders. The fourth side was claimed by Baltan Carid, who was scratching the gray in his beard and clasping a mug of something surely alcoholic.

Against the far wall, sniper Ram Zerimar was talking to Mird Skirata, who had only a hint of his grandfather Jaing's facial structure beneath his pale skin, green eyes, and dirty blond hair.

As Fett often reflected, genetics was a strange thing.

Carid noticed him hovering in the doorway, raised a glass, and invited him to sit. Fett took one step in and stopped. Some of the others might have been wearing armor but everyone had his or her helmet off except for Fett himself. He felt a strange urge to take it off, sit down, and have a drink from Carid, but the looks from Jaing and Mereel killed that desire fast. The younger Skiratas, the ones with Jango Fett looks diluted through a few generations, may not have liked or trusted their *Mand'alor*, but they at least bothered to conceal their naked disdain. The same could hardly be said for

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the two wizened Null ARC troopers, who stared at him like ancient gargoyle statues warding off anyone who dared take another step.

Ungrateful *chakaare*. It was like they didn't *want* to go home.

"There's been a development," Fett said simply. "We've recovered a long-range unmanned probe, probably used by the civilian fleet. Daala wants its data as soon as possible."

"Best of luck to her," Jaing said.

"Right now the only slicers onboard are Lecersen's, and she doesn't trust the *hut'uun*. Neither do I." Maybe a bit of good old *Mando'a* cussing would get them on board. "She wants someone to go give our friend Lecersen some *help*."

"It's that worm's fault we're out here now," Mereel shook his head.

"And he may be the only one who can get us back home." Fett tried to keep the anger out of his voice. Mereel has tracked General Grievous in the Clone Wars. He'd sliced into Palpatine's personal data files. Once upon a time, that bitter old man had been one of the best slicers in the galaxy. "That data might save our hides from a Yuuzhan Vong attack. We need to make sure *we* get it."

The old clones kept scowling, but Dinua said, "What do they think is on it?"

"Don't know. Astrogration data for sure. I think the admiral hopes we can trace it back to whatever ship it came from."

"Do you want to ally with the renegades?" Mird asked from the far wall, "Or do you want to kill them?"

"That's Daala's decision, but I'm betting on the former. You can never have too much help when you fight the crab boys."

He let his head swing slowly from one side to the other, making it clear he was scanning the room.

"Well, then, someone needs to get down there." Dinua's expression was firm. She was no slicer, but she'd lost her mother at the start of the Vong War.

Mereel stayed where he was. "I thought we were paid to shoot, not play with computers."

"Hey, why not both?" Carid chuckled, trying to add some levity to the situation. "I mean, what's wrong with a little variety?"

The door on the far side of the room opened, and a handful of others walked into the mess hall. Fett felt his gut sink. In the lead was Venku, without his helmet but dressed in his piecemeal, multi-colored armor. Two lightsabers hung at his belt; he'd started wearing those once his Jedi parentage got outed, though he still professed no love for the *Jetii*, which was a smart move if you wanted to stay alive on Mandalore.

In his wake were two more men. Jaller Skirata was another clone's kid, on the far end of middle-age like Venku. Whoever his mom had been, it didn't show; looking at his tanned face and dark eyes was like staring at a holo of Boba Fett twenty years back. The last one in wore a saber at his belt, too, but he looked even older than the clones. The lines in his face made his frown look especially deep. Fett wondered if he was like that all the time, or if it was just his typical reaction to his *Mand'alor*. Either way, he couldn't bring himself to hate Gotab, because the ex-Jedi had helped restore the memory of his wife Sintas after fifty years in carbonite. However, he expected them to make this talk even more difficult.

"What's the situation?" Venku asked Fett directly, though everyone else was looking at him too. The Skiratas all seemed to accord him a special respect, even the crotchety old clones.

"We need a slicer or two," Fett said pointedly. "Lecersen's boys are trying to crack into a long-range probe we captured, but Daala doesn't want that *chakaar* left to his own devices. I wouldn't recommend it either."

Venku looked around the room. He was always so damnably calm, so different from the typical raucous Mando warrior. Maybe that was why everyone seemed to respect him. That, and all his fancy ideas about Mandalore for Mandos, though since his exile he hadn't talked about that as much as before.

"There could be important information there," Jendri spoke up.

"We were hired to kill crab boys," Mereel said. "Not play around with probes."

Venku's eyes met Mereel's, but he said nothing. When he broke the clone's gaze he finally spoke. "It seems to me that we were hired to get a job done. The exact *how* wasn't specified."

"The Imps thinks Mandos aren't good for anything besides getting drunk and shooting things," Fett said. "But they're wrong, aren't they?"

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A wry smile touched Venku's face. "I think they are. Mereel, Mird, why don't you go check things out?"

"Sounds good to me," Mird said, though he didn't start for the door.

All eyes settled on Mereel. After a pregnant pause, the old clone blew out a sigh, flipped his gray braids over his shoulder, and got to his feet. "Fine. Let's take a look, *Mird'ika*."

Fett stepped aside to let the two of them out of the room. When the door closed shut he looked back at Venku. He tilted his helmet forward in a little nod, and Venku nodded back. Then he sat down at Mereel's chair and the talk started up again.

Boba Fett turned around and walked out of the mess hall. The door slid shut on the clamor behind him.

Captain Elscol Loro stood on the bridge of *Phoenix*, watching clouds of crimson, blue, and creamy-white gas swirl on the surface of the nameless planet below. If you travel through space too much and you became numbed to the natural wonders of the galaxy, only to be reminded in quiet moments such as this.

Elscol hated quiet. The gas giant, though beautiful, seemed a reminder of all the important things they had left to do. The hunt for the Yuuzhan Vong fleet was proceeding as an excruciatingly slow pace. It went the same, time after time: jump to a new system, send out unmanned probes that darted into hyperspace, chart the system, wait for the probes to chart theirs, then wait for the probes to come back. Then jump to a new system and start all over again. They'd been repeating the same pattern for over a week and found nothing. The one benefit was that it gave ship crews time to repair the damage from the last encounter with the Vong.

She'd just finished a systems check with *Phoenix*'s first officer, a woman named Floran Welby who was barely half Elscol's age but had still seen nasty fighting in the Vong war. Their relationship was professional, but Elscol didn't feel any comradely bond with Welby as she had with the commandos she'd once fought the Empire with.

Nor did she feel any with the other captains in the fleet. They were an odd mix, humans and Bothans and Mon Cals, former Alliance and former Confederation officers all drawn together by the shared trauma of the Vong

War. Trauma was a private thing, and while she respected the abilities and drive of her fellow captains there'd been no attempt at friendship. The only person in this fleet she felt any personal bond with was Aref'ja himself; Aref'ja and, strangely, the young woman in the brig she'd never met before this mission.

Elscol was restless, but she stared at the gas giant anyway while the background chatter of the crew faded to nothing. At one point someone reported that a probe had returned, and she merely nodded while it was brought into the docking bay for analysis. She wondered why she was here at all, pacing the deck in her captain's uniform. Elscol was a soldier, and a mindless dewback could captain a bridge in peacetime.

Boredom and regret swirled around in her mind like the vapors on the gas giant. When Miranda Fardreamer cleared her throat behind her Elscol jerked back in shock.

She straightened herself and scowled down at the girl. "Report," she said.

"I just got back from lunch with the prisoner," Miranda said.

"Very good," Elscol nodded.

It had taken until two days ago for Antilles to request Miranda's company. The girl didn't like her bond-with-the-prisoner assignment, but she swallowed her shame and did her duty, because after her failure on Tatooine she knew she deserved it. The girl had a talent for self-punishment. She reminded Elscol a little of herself.

"You can listen to the recordings if you like," Miranda said, "But she hasn't said anything major. Mostly little things about herself, her family. Her father, of course."

"Of course," said Elscol, and nothing more. If they had picked up anyone except the daughter of Wedge Antilles things would have been different. Aggressive interrogation methods, for one thing. Elscol would have taken charge of that. Instead she hung back and had Miranda do gentle prying.

Maybe Elscol was softer than she wanted to be. Or, alternatively, she didn't want to harm the daughter of one of the few beings whose respect she still valued. Either way, Bren Aref'ja, gentleman renegade that he was, did not press her.

"Permission to speak freely, Captain?" Miranda asked.

Elscol glanced around the bridge. The ship was running itself, as usual. "Go ahead," she said.

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"Captain, I don't see the point of my talking to her. Surely there has to be better things for me to do."

"It's only an hour a day," Elscol reminded her. "Besides, what you're doing is important."

"How?" Miranda scowled. "She doesn't know any-thing. I'd bet her *bosses* didn't know anything when they sent her, either."

"You're probably right," Elscol admitted. "But it's important that you keep talking to her. When the crunch comes, we want her on our side."

"Why? She's just one woman."

"She's not just one woman. She is the daughter of Wedge Antilles, arguably the most celebrated war hero in the entire galaxy. She's been pumped full of goodness and duty and honor since the day she was born. If we can convince her of the rightness of our mission, we can convince anyone."

It was a lie, but it sounded like the truth, and Miranda nodded reluctantly. "A lot of people are going to need convincing, once it's all over."

Elscol didn't care what happened when this was over, but Miranda, despite all her bitterness, was young enough to keep looking toward the future. So did Arefja, so she had practice pretending to care whether she lived through this fight or died.

She laid a hand on the girl's shoulder and said, "You might think this assignment is punishment, but it's not. I gave it because I trust you."

Miranda looked skeptical, but nodded. "Thank you for that, Captain."

"Make sure you have a nice chat tomorrow too. Take longer than an hour, if need be."

She tried to hide her disappointment. "Yes, Captain."

She gave Miranda's shoulder a light squeeze, then withdrew her hand and clasped it to the other behind her back. "Now, there's something else I'd like to discuss with-"

"Captain!" someone shouted from the navigation station, "We three vessels, dropping out of hyperspace!"

Elscol forgot about Miranda in an instant. Her body trilled with adrenaline as she stalked toward the nav station. "Put all systems on red alert!" she barked. "Can you identify?"

"Not Vong." The nav officer shook her head. "Three small ships... looks like *Marauder*-class corvettes."

Elscol frowned. She'd been ready for Alliance, Imperial, Chiss, Vong, or other alien ships, not pirate vessels. "Are they heading this way?"

"Yes, captain! Their shields are up!"

"Weapons hot?"

"Can't tell, sir."

Elscol spun on communications. "Send out *Hope* and *Borleais* to intercept. What's our closest heavy?"

"That would be *Sunbeam*, sir," reported Captain Welby. "Should I tell Captain Vatrim to scramble fighters?"

"Affirmative," Admiral Aref'ja said as he strode onto the command deck. He plucked at the sleeves of his uniform and nodded in Elscol's direction.

He continued, "Get on the line with *Fey'lya's Revenge*. Tell Saiv'tu to scramble his birds."

A broad tactical holo appeared in the middle of the deck, right where Elscol was standing. She stepped out of the big blue globe representing to gas giant and watched the markers representing the Marauders continue their approach.

"No firing yet," Welby reported. "They'll reach the gunships in fifty seconds."

"Where's that fighter screen?" Elscol barked. Aref'ja should be calling the shots now, but she couldn't stand back and do nothing.

"They'll be out, um, soon..." the tactical officer muttered.

Sloppy. Amateurish. Elscol ran through a dozen nastier insults in her head as she watched the Marauder approach the gunships.

Then a new marker, big and red, appeared on the other side of the fleet.

"Sithspawn!" Tactical shouted. "Two Impstars, right on top of us!"

"Scramble fighters!" Aref'ja shouted. "*Niathal, Lacentra*, move to intercept. And Lieutenant, watch your mouth!"

"Marauders are in firing range!" Welby reported.

Elscol watched the holo carefully. The Marauders swung in close to the gunships and began firing. "Status on the gunships," she requested.

"Shots across the bow," Communications reported. "And- wait! Admiral, we're getting a hail from an Impstar!"

Aref'ja licked his teeth and said, "Put it on speaker."

Audio speakers crackled overhead. A voice, cold, smooth, female, said, "Renegade fleet, this is Admiral Natasi Daala of the *Chimaera*."

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Daala. Of all the violent power-mad tyrants in the galaxy-

Welby's jaw dropped but Aref'ja showed no perturbation. He said, "Admiral Daala, this is Admiral Bren Aref'ja onboard the *Phoenix*. I noticed you haven't fired on our ships yet."

"Nor you on ours," Daala observed. Elscol could hear smug satisfaction at catching them with their proverbial trousers down.

"We mean you no harm, Admiral," Aref'ja said. "As you've probably surmised, we're after the Yuuzhan Vong, not you."

"What a *delicious* coincidence, Admiral Aref'ja. *We're* after the Vong too." Daala's sugary tone made Elscol sick.

"Then we have no reason attack each other," Aref'ja said. "Turn back those Marauders."

And just like that, the three corvettes did a sharp U-turn and ran away from the gunships. Elscol didn't relax. She still had two star destroyers sitting right overhead, able to rain turbolaser terror at any moment. *Phoenix* was a smaller ship but also newer, and just as well-armed and shielded. *Lacentra* and *Cha Niathal* were both Mon Cal cruisers, old and heavy and able to slug it out with two Impstars if the situation demanded it. Combined with the three Bothan Assault Cruisers and support vessels, Elscol still thought it was a battle they could win, albeit an ugly one.

Then four more ships dropped out of hyperspace near the Marauders: two *Lancer*-class anti-starfighters frigates, an old *Venator*-class relic from the Clone Wars, and an interdicator cruiser powering up its gravity wells.

"That drag ship's almost online, Admiral!" Navigation reported.

Aref'ja bore his fangs in frustration. "There's no need to be hasty, Admiral Daala. I would *love* to negotiate an alliance with you."

"I'm glad to hear that," Daala purred. "And to show my good faith, I volunteer to meet you aboard your ship. Expect me within the hour. You won't miss me. I'll be in an assault shuttle escorted by four Mandalorian *besu'liike* fighters. I advise you not to provoke them."

The comm channel closed in a fizzle of static. One of the comm officers soundlessly mouthed 'Mandos?' in shock and terror. Aref'ja stood in silence, staring at the blue glow of the tactical holo. His fur bristled and his ears were flat against his skull. He stalked through the dancing light, came right up to Elscol, and said, "Find your dress uniform, Captain, then report to the

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main hangar desk. We're going to give our new friends a first-class welcome."

Part II: *Alone* in the Night

Chapter 7

Jaina was in her quarters on *Celestial*, lying on her bed and staring at the ceiling, when there was a chime from her door. She closed her eyes, exhaled, and felt a cool and controlled presence with the Force. There was a lot of that on this ship, but Jagged's sister projected an especially strong sense of discipline, the kind that belonged to people who had grown up alone and thought and acted like they could trust no one but themselves. That Twi'lek Imperial, Fy'lyor felt the same. Her husband had too, a long time ago.

When the buzzer went off again she rolled off the bed, stood up straight, and said, "Enter."

Wynssa stepped in alone. She had her hands clasped behind her stiff back and head tilted upward, like she was looking down on whoever she talked to.

Jaina sighed said, "Commodore, I apologize again for striking you. It was uncalled for."

"Yes. It was," Wynssa said. After a long and pregnant pause, she tilted her head down a little, exhaled, and relaxed her posture. "However, I admit that some of my words were uncalled for as well."

"Feeling tense?" Jaina asked.

"In part," Wynssa admitted. She hid her emotions well but Jaina could tell she was fumbling for the right words.

Finally she said, "I met your brother once. On Csilla, when he and your aunt and uncle came looking for Zonama Sekot."

"I remember hearing about that," Jaina said.

She remembered Jacen laughing about how different Wynssa and Jagged were. The Jacen from that time had changed until he was unrecognizable, and she supposed Wynn and Jagged had changed a lot too, to say nothing of herself.

"I found him very curious," Wynssa said, then added, "I was young at the time, and easily entranced, especially by a young human with some connection to my own family."

She hid it well, but Jaina recognized those feelings. She said, "You had a crush."

"He was *interesting*," Wynssa repeated, "And I was young."

"Yeah," Jaina sighed. "So was he, then."

Wynssa shook her head. "No. He was very mature. Naive, but still mature. When I first heard about his actions detaining Corellians and cracking down on separatists, I was curious as to what had changed."

"Yeah," Jaina looked down at her feet. "Me too." After everything that had happened, she still didn't understand what had driven Jacen dark. Even knowing about Allana, the Dark Man in his vision, and damage inflicted on him by Vergere and the Yuuzhan Vong, she still could not pinpoint the place and time where her twin brother had begun his irrevocable transformation into Darth Caedus.

"I was impressed at first," Wynssa said. Jaina snapped her head up to look at her. "I had thought that he'd finally found, how should I say, a *spine*. That he finally understood that force is sometimes necessary to solve problems, and that sometimes there must be winners and losers to a fight."

"Believe me," Jaina said, "He understood too well."

"So it seems." Wynssa looked aside. Jaina could feel the emotions simmering beneath that icy exterior and allowed herself to feel sorry for her.

Jaina took two steps forward, awkwardly extended a hand and said, "Thank you for coming to tell me that."

Wynssa nodded and shook Jaina's hand in a firm grip. As she took her hand away she said, "I actually did *not* come to talk to you about that. My

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main purpose was to invite you to come with me to your carrier, the *Corusca Gem*."

Jaina blinked. "Why? What happened?"

Wynssa raised an eyebrow. "Did you not notice the fight?"

Jaina's jaw fell open. "No, I didn't notice one, no. Did you?"

"We jumped to the coordinates after the reconnaissance flight found wreckage. When we arrived we were attacked by a race called Tylonians. I don't believe your kind has not encountered them before, but we have. Their captured vessels are currently being held aboard *Gem*."

Jaina looked around the blank gray walls of her quarters, wondering how the Chiss put together ships that could take you into combat without you even noticing. She asked, "Were there casualties?"

"I believe several of your starfighters were lost, but otherwise the damage was minor," Wynssa said. "Now, would you follow me? Please?"

"Of course," Jaina said. "Who else is coming?"

"Captain Fy'lyor is coming from *Justifier*, and Admiral Kre'fey and Jagged from *Starless*," Wynssa said. Jaina was a little surprised to hear her refer to her brother by his first name.

"Come," Wynssa stepped toward the door, "We should be going."

Jaina took a moment to clip her lightsaber to her belt, followed her out into the hallway. Wynssa led her down a new corridor, one she hadn't passed through before, until they reached a lift tube. After waiting for a minute, the lift doors opened, revealing a pair of Chiss women wearing white lab coats over their uniforms and cradling some kind of sealed containers in their arms. Jaina immediately felt their shock ripple through the Force, though their glowing red eyes betrayed nothing.

Wynssa slammed the button on the wall and the lift door closed. She turned back to Jaina, smiled politely, and said, "I'm sorry, they were going in the opposite direction. The lift will be back shortly."

"Of course," Jaina smiled back. She watched as markers above the door and saw the lift stop at level five. Then it went down again. The door slid open revealing an empty tube. Wynssa ushered Jaina in, then sealed the door behind them.

Captain Fy'lyor gripped the sides of her chair as her shuttle entered *Corusca Gem's* broad hangar. She did not hold tight because it had been a rough ride, or because she expected a rough landing. She was so anxious she could barely sit still, and the moment the shuttle made touchdown she unbuckled her crash webbing and made for the exit. She tapped her boot-tips impatiently on the deck as she waited for the landing ramp to extend and when she got out onto the deck she told the waiting Alliance guards, "Take me to the prisoners" without letting them get a word in.

As they led her down winding hallways into the belly of the carrier, she asked her Diamalan guard, "Have the other captains arrived yet?"

"The Chiss party is already there," he said. "Not sure about the others, ma'am."

Fy'lyor nodded wordlessly. It seemed she would have to wait a little longer to find out if she was going to be the last one there. It didn't really matter if she was or not, but her anxiety was a habit burned into her in the academy: always come first, stay latest, work hardest. Never, ever, *ever* let them look down on you or take you for granted or, worst of all, ignore you entirely. *Prove yourself*, every hour of every day.

Of course, Task Force Trinity was not the Empire. She was not constantly working with crusty old men who saw her as a novelty or an exotic trinket. She could, in theory, drop her guard among them, if only the fate of the galaxy wasn't at stake.

When she arrived at her destination she was reminded again what a strange coalition this was. The guard showed her into a large room, paneled in plain white walls and empty space except for one table. A Chiss officer was sitting at the table and setting up some kind of datapad and recording device. Hovering impatiently around him was another Chiss, a stern blond-haired woman wearing a black uniform, a small brunette with a lightsaber hanging from her belt, and, last but certainly not least, a two-meter-tall Calibop with a blue Alliance uniform draped across her long brown-and-red feathered torso.

Mila Pavric, *Corusca Gem's* captain, blinked small avian eyes at Fy'lyor, rustled her wings slightly, and said, "Welcome aboard, Captain."

"Thank you for having me," Fy'lyor said simply.

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She of all people shouldn't have been bothered by non-humans, but for the life of her she couldn't recall meeting any of Pavric's race before, or even seeing any aside from holos of the old New Republic president Ponc Gavrisom shaking hands with Gilad Pellaeon. She had never expected to meet one either; they were a race famous for philosophy and politics, not warfare.

"Welcome, Captain," Wynssa Fel nodded at her. "I trust your flight was smooth."

Fy'lyor had wondered, but never had the chance to ask, what it had been like for her growing up surrounded by Chiss. Wynssa seemed a very different creature than her brother. That was, Fy'lyor thought, likely due to Jagged's wife, who currently stood with her hands behind her back, avoiding both Wynssa and Fy'lyor with her eyes.

Probably meant trouble with the in-laws. For some reason Fy'lyor got a little twisted pleasure from the thought.

"Commodore Fel's people are currently setting up the recording and translating material," Pavric waved a wing at the direction of the Chiss officer setting up equipment.

"Where is the delegation from *Starless*?" Fy'lyor asked.

"They just landed and should be here shortly."

"Excellent. And where are the prisoners?"

"Right here," Wynssa Fel said.

She went over to the far wall and turned a switch. Its smooth white surface faded into transparency. Beyond, Fy'lyor saw a pair of aliens unlike anything she'd ever seen. Their bodies were vaguely humanoid, but elongated and flattened, like someone had run over a Bith or a Givin with a giant wheel. They wore black jumpsuits without apparent markings. Their limbs were like gray paddles. Even their spade-shaped heads were less than ten centimeters thick. Each 'face' had four sets of small black eyes and two black slits for mouths. They seemed fundamentally strange in a way not even Pavric had.

"Tylonians are native to a low-gravity planet," Wynssa explained. "Those suits allow them to operate in our gravitation for extended periods."

Fy'lyor was fascinated by the strange beings but tried not to show it. She asked, "Is the viewport one-way?"

"That's correct," Pavric's head bobbed on its long neck.

"And do they breathe our oxygen?"

"No," Fel said, "But they only need to breathe once every day or so."

Fy'lyor wondered for a moment if the woman was putting her on, but she doubted whether Wynssa Fel had a sense of humor left. People who called Imperial officers humorless had clearly never met the Chiss.

"Will we go in there and talk to them?" she asked, glancing at both Fel and Pavric.

"That is one possibility," Pavric said. "We may also communicate with them from this room."

"We're waiting for Commander Fel to decide," Jaina Solo finally spoke up.

As if on cue, the doors opened and Jagged Fel, dressed in his red-striped semi-uniform stepped in. Following him was the old white-furred Bothan, Kre'fey.

Fel gave the room an impassive survey. His eyes didn't seem to linger on Fy'lyor, or his sister, or his wife, or even the huge feathery Calibop.

He said, "I see everyone is here. Are we ready to begin the interrogation?"

"We are," the Chiss as the table said.

"We can do it in-person or through the viewport." Solo gestured to the transparent wall. "Your choice."

Fel glanced at the prisoners through the one-way viewport. He asked Pavric, "Can that 'port be made fully transparent?"

The Calibop's head bobbed. "Of course."

"And is it possible to pump di-hydrogen sulphate into that chamber?"

"It will take a few minutes," said Pavric.

"Get ready and wait for my message."

Pavric nodded and left the room, hunching her wings together to pass through the doorway. When she was gone, Fel told the Chiss with the machine, "I want you to translate everything I say. Is that clear?"

"Of course," the Chiss nodded.

Fel stepped up to the viewport and gestured for the others to do the same. Solo stood to one side, Kre'fey to the other. Fy'lyor sidled next to the Bothan while Wynssa stood next to Solo.

"Make the viewport transparent," Fel ordered, and the second Chiss officer tapped the switch on the wall.

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The prisoners immediately took notice when one of their cell walls cleared. The Tylonians' flat, limp bodies straightened and their four-eyed heads turned to stare at the five figures that had appeared in front of them. The larger of the Tylonians started speaking, but to Fy'lyor's ears it sounded like two hounds barking at the same time.

The Chiss, or rather their translation machine, didn't miss a beat. The officer, reading off his screen, said, "They demands to know why they're being held prisoner."

"They're being held prisoner because they attacked our ships without provocation," Fel said. He had his hands clasped behind his rod-straight back and spoke with severe authority. Combined with his father's bloodstripes, he looked like the fine Imperial he should have been.

Fy'lyor heard a series of barking noises relayed over the cell's internal speakers, echoed back into the viewing chamber. The first Tylonian make a swift reply, and in turn the translator said, "Their entire fleet was wiped out. They are the sole survivors of a massacre."

"Tell them we did not start that fight, the Yuuzhan Vong did. We could have helped them if only they'd asked."

Fel's words were translated and relayed. The Tylonians seemed to regard each other, two pairs of four unblinking eyes, and then the second one barked something. The translator said, "They were hiding within the hull of a dead enemy ship for camouflage and because they needed to make repairs. They assumed that when we arrived, we were the enemy, come to finish them off."

Fy'lyor had expected as much. She glanced at the white-furred face of Traest Kre'fey. She was not very familiar with Bothan facial expressions, but she thought she was something like relief.

"How was it you came upon the enemy ships?" Fel asked them. "The battle took place far away from any system. Did you find them or did they find you?"

The question was translated, and the first Tylonian replied again. After a moment, the Chiss translator said, "They say they were pulled from hyperspace and attacked."

"It was a trap," Solo suggested. Her dark eyebrows were angled in thought. "Those coordinates were meant for the renegade fleet. The Vong were waiting there to destroy them."

"Or the renegades were planning to ambush the Yuuzhan Vong," Fel suggested.

Husband and wife traded significant glances. Fy'lyor did not fully understand how the Trinity fleet had come in possession of the mysterious coordinates (some people got to keep their secrets), but those two clearly did, and were trying to make sense of the new revelation.

Wynssa Fel cleared her throat and asked, "Have your people encountered any of the Yuuzhan Vong before?"

After a pair of translations, the Chiss officer said, "They claim they did not know what the vessels were. At first they thought they were asteroids, then some sort of space-faring organic life."

"Technically correct," Kre'fey muttered, then glanced at Jagged Fel. "We need all the information they can give on the Vong fleet, including sensor information from their vessels, if we don't have it already."

"I've already loaned two technicians to Pavric's team," Wynssa Fel reported. "They're familiar with Tylonian technology."

"We still want their cooperation," her brother said. "I propose an exchange. They tell us what they know about the Vong, and we give them what we know."

Wynssa frowned. "Which 'we' are we speaking of, exactly?"

Jagged gave her a polite, dangerous smile. "I thought we were all on the same page as far as the Yuuzhan Vong were concerned."

"The Empire will be happy to give them everything in *Justifier's* database," Fy'lyor declared, and Jagged gave her a look of wordless thanks. Wynssa, still frowning, nodded her agreement.

The first Tylonian barked something inside the cell, and his partner joined in. After a second's pause, the translator said simply, "They're very impatient."

Jagged faced the viewport. "We're willing to make a deal. In exchange for your sensor logs, and everything you know about the ships you encountered, we will give you all our information on the Yuuzhan Vong. I assure you, our data is far more thorough than yours. You're certainly getting the better deal here."

The message was relayed, and the two Tylonians began barking again, this time toward each other. The noise was so horrible Fy'lyor wondered how the people on their home-world hadn't gone collectively mad.

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Finally, the second one faced the viewport and barked a reply. The translator said, "They want to know why they should trust you."

"They'll trust me because I am a generous man," Fel said, and then brought his comlink to his lips. "Captain Pavric, this is Commander Fel. I want you to pump that di-hydrogen sulfate in now, standard density."

Fy'lyor couldn't see a change in the air with her eyes, or even hear the clanking of atmospheric pumps, but she saw the Tylonians open their mouths- all four of them- and take deep, savoring breaths.

The first Tylonian looked at the viewport and said something else. It might have been Fy'lyor's imagination, but he did not sound so angry this time.

"They are willing to talk, and transfer their sensory data," the translator said, relief just barely breaking through that cool Chiss facade.

"Tell them we appreciate their generosity," Jagged said, and directed a tiny smile at his sister that might have counted as bragging. The blond woman's facade didn't even crack.

The process of questioning the Tylonians went on for some time, caused in no small part by the difficulties of translation. When they finally finished, and Captain Pavric's security people led the Tylonians back to their ship, Captain Fy'lyor went back to her own shuttle so she could have *Justifier* begin the transfer from its databanks. Wynssa Fel began instructing her Chiss officers as they cleaned up their equipment, and Jaina managed to separate her husband from Kre'fey on the excuse of grabbing food and exchanging intimate conversation.

As she led him down the corridor to *Gem*'s mess, she hooked her arm into his, pulled him close, and said, "That went fairly well, didn't it?"

"I think so," Jag nodded. "Fy'lyor was unexpectedly helpful."

"Yeah, full of surprises, that one." Jaina blew out a breath. "I think your sister is too."

"Did you have a heart-to-heart?" Jag raised a brow.

First they had a slapping match, *then* a heart-to-heart (or close enough), but Jaina didn't want to talk about either of that now. She pulled Jag in closer, faked a flirtatious smile in case anyone was watching, and whispered, "There's something going on she doesn't want me to know about."

He didn't seem surprised. "The Chiss are a very private people. It took a good deal of convincing to get her to allow you on board at all."

"When we were heading for the shuttle I ran into some lab techs in the lift. They weren't just surprised to see, me they *terrified*."

"Good at reading sabacc faces, are you?"

"This isn't a joke, Jag. They were screaming it through the Force. They went to a lab on deck five, whatever that means."

"And you suspect something beyond ordinary Chiss secrecy?"

"Jag, listen to me." They stopped in the hallway. She glanced either way to make sure they were alone, then stood up on her toes and pulled his face close to hers. "We didn't even expect the Chiss to join this party. Then they show up with just one ship, heavily guarded, with secret scientists on board."

Jag closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You're talking about Alpha Red."

"You're kriffing right I am."

During the Yuuzhan Vong War, Alpha Red had been a biological agent designed by the Chiss, in conjunction with Alliance Intelligence, which could eradicate all Yuuzhan Vong life. The Alliance kept its remaining samples of the disease under ultra-secure lockdown at a secret location. The Chiss pledged that they had destroyed all copies of the agent, but of course offered no proof.

"Jag," she insisted, "What if your sister came here to exterminate the Vong and destroy Zonoma Sekot?"

He closed his eyes and felt his turmoil. He and his sister hadn't seen in each other in over a decade, and if he had to act against her to complete the mission she knew that he would, but it would not be easy.

When he opened his eyes he said, "We need proof."

"I know," Jaina nodded. "How do we get it?"

"How familiar are you with her ship?"

"Not at all. I only have access to a few corridors."

"Where could the Force get you?"

"I don't know. I can scrub out cameras, cover my tracks, but there's no way I can get into that lab unaided. Even if I forced the door open I'm sure I'd set off alarms."

"Okay," Jag said, "What if I sent help?"

"What kind of help?"

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"Wraith Squadron has a Clawdite. Also a Yuuzhan Vong who's good with disguises."

"How do you get them on board, though?"

"I'm not sure." Jag frowned. "I'll have to find some excuse. Supplies for *Celestial*, maybe. Computer cores, armaments, or something."

"I don't think your sister is going to welcome strange equipment. Here's a better idea. They can come to take me home."

Jag raised an eyebrow. "Getting along poorly with Wyn, are you?"

"Well, I did slap her," Jaina deadpanned.

Jag gaped. "Jaina, are you-"

"We worked it out, mostly. But it could be an excuse to transfer me to *Justifier* and send Ben over here."

"Goodness. You really did slap her?"

"Yeah, well, she deserved it." Jaina shrugged.

A wry smile formed on his lips. "Did she slap you back?"

"Hey, stop it!" she said. "This is serious."

"I know. Apologies. But... Yes, that may do the trick. I'll have to think about it further."

"I know. But think fast."

"I will." Jag stepped away from her and wiped his damp palms on the red sides of his uniform. He said, "Be ready for anything."

"Yes sir," she told her husband, right as a pair of Frozian crewmen came walking down the hall, chatting and chuckling to themselves, paying them barely any notice.

It took a long time to sift through the wreckage and figure out if anything was worth keeping. Debris from both Yuuzhan Vong and Tylonian vessels had been spread across a huge wash of space and varied from charred twisted chunks of metal or yorik coral to near-complete frigate-sized vessels, cut open and decompressed in the vacuum. The EV teams that went into those frigates reported nothing living, but plenty of things that *had* lived, only to die in twisted agony in the vacuum. Jesmin Tainer was very glad the Wraiths were not part of those missions.

They were, however, tasked with some of the clean-up. The EV team that went inside one of the big frigates came back with an interesting find:

a shuttle-sized craft that appeared organic but did not match the typical Yuuzhan Vong design. It had been located in the belly of the frigate and had not withstood severe damage in the fight, though best anyone could tell the ship was still dead. It was, therefore, shipped over to *Starless's* auxiliary hangar for further examination.

Among the crew of Task Force Trinity, less than a quarter had seen action in the Yuuzhan Vong War. Given that the war ended fifteen years ago, it wasn't a huge surprise, but it did leave only a limited pool of people who had any experience with the Vong, and an even smaller pool that was familiar with their technology. Jesmin Tainer was neither of those, but for whatever reason, she was tasked with helping to investigate the captured shuttle.

She wasn't alone. She was accompanied by Sharr Latt (who'd actually fought the Vong), Viull "Scut" Gorsat (who actually was one, even if he'd been raised by humans), and Huhunna (who was neither, but as the Wraith's mechanic she knew a lot about ships). What Jesmin's role was, she wasn't sure. Maybe they'd need someone to hold things.

The captured ship was placed in the corner of the hangar. It was separated from the other shuttles and blastboats by a cordon and three armed guards. The vessel was about the size of a *Lambda*-class shuttle, though its basic design recalled an old K-Wing bomber. It had a broad central body, made of some smooth green-tinted material, with one pair of wings spread straight outward and another shorter pair slanted downward, though these currently seemed to double as landing struts that held the ship's belly some three meters above the hangar deck.

Even to Jesmin's untrained eye, it was clear someone had modified this craft. In the rear rough yorik coral dovin basals had been grafted onto what, conceivably, had been artificial thrust or ion engines. Likewise, volcanic cannons had been attached to the tips of the main wings, possibly in place of defensive laser emplacements.

"It is a fascinating design," Scut said as he and Jesmin walked beneath the belly of the ship. He wore a neoglith masquer of his own making whenever he worked in public. Only the Wraiths ever saw his regular face, curiously smooth and unscarred compared to the Yuuzhan Vong typically seen in reference holos. He was a big man, like most of his species, but he was also thoughtful, scientific, and a little distant. Jesmin knew she had nothing to

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fear from him, but most beings didn't, so he had to go through his life with a mask on, and she felt sorry for him because of it.

"How do we get inside?" Jesmin asked. The belly of the ship might have had a landing ramp once, but burn-marks ran down its entire underside. During the battle this portion of the hull must have been superheated by an explosion, melted, then instantly re-frozen and fused together by the vacuum.

"I am not sure," Scut reached up and ran his fingertips along the burn marks on the hull.

"The most important things have to be inside," Jesmin said. She tapped the lightsaber at her belt. "If we have to, I can cut in, but there has to be another way."

"I am sure there is," Scut said. "Jesmin, have you studied the designs of the organic starfighters produced by Zonama Sekot?"

"Only a little," Jesmin had admitted. It had been part of the reference material package given to all the Wraiths before the mission began, though she'd skimmed over the parts not specifically about the Vong and the different ways they could kill people.

"It bears a resemblance," Scut said. "Those ships used technological implants for things like engines, weapons, and control interfaces. It almost looks like someone ripped those out and replaced them with Yuuzhan Vong bio-tech."

"That's exactly what it looks like," said a voice behind them.

They turned to see a woman passing through the guard cordon. Like Jesmin, she had long blond hair and a lightsaber dangling from her belt. Tahiri Veila, however, was at once five years older than Jesmin and nearly a head shorter. Three pale scars on her forehead were a constant reminder that she had been through the Yuuzhan Vong War and seen great trauma.

The Jedi's rank on this mission was somewhat unclear, which bothered some people a lot more than it bothered the Wraiths, who were never much for clear orders and chains of command either. Nevertheless, Scut snapped into a salute and Jesmin, not wanting to look disrespectful, did the same.

Tahiri shook her head. "Don't bother. I'm on the same team as you."

"Here to help us with the new guest?" Sharr Latt asked as he and Huhunna approached from the aft of the vessel. The big Wookiee had to hunch her head down to keep from hitting the ship's underside.

"That's the plan." Tahiri said. "Good to see you again, Sharr."

"It's been a long time since Borleias," Sharr smiled. When Tahiri didn't smile back, he said, "These here are the new kids. Meet Huhunna, a.k.a. "Climber," Viull Gorsat, a.k.a. "Scut," and Miss Jesmin "Ranger" Tainer."

"You father was with us on Borleais too," Tahiri glanced at Jesmin. "Does he still like to blow things up?"

"He's a consultant for a demolitions company, so yeah, I guess so."

"I'm glad to hear that." Tahiri allowed a little smile, but it faded when she looked at Scut. "You're wearing an oogloth masquer, aren't you?"

"I call it a neogloth masquer," Scut said, at once surprised and a little defensive. "Something I cooked up based on existing Yuuzhan Vong biotech."

"But you're Yuuzhan Vong," Tahiri pressed.

"Yes. Can you not feel me in the Force?"

Jesmin was curious as to her answer. Her own Force abilities were too weak to make her Jedi material- she'd found that out after two months at the Academy- but she was capable of things like basic telekinesis and sensing peoples' moods. For her, Scut's lack of presence in the Force had always been a dull reminder of his otherness, but most of the time she didn't even notice. For a true Jedi, it might have felt very different.

Tahiri considered before she said, "I can sense you, but not with the Force. I have something else, something *like* the Force, I can sense your presence with. It's a side effect of... experiences in the war."

Jesmin tried hard not to stare at those three pale scars on her forehead. The Jedi in general were very controversial at the moment and Tahiri Veila might have been the most controversial at all. After she killed Admiral Pellaeon, some saw her as a murdering monster, others as a simple soldier carrying out unfortunate orders, and others still as a victim who had been traumatized by the Yuuzhan Vong and Jacen Solo's machinations. Jesmin's parents had always insisted she was the last one.

Whatever Tahiri herself felt, she wasn't saying. Instead, she directed everyone's attention to the big, strange spaceship they were currently standing under.

"This is a Sekotan ship all right," she explained. "I flew one once. It was a model a lot like this, including the modifications with Yuuzhan Vong biotechnology."

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"Has it been done on a mass scale?" Scut asked. As a bio-technologist and a Yuuzhan Vong, he must have been very interested in the science behind the grafting.

"From what I've seen," Tahiri said, "The attempts were never very successful. Ships that mixed technologies would die only weeks or months after their creation."

"But Sekotan and Vong tech *are* related, right?" Sharr asked, then said, "Sorry, *Yuuzhan* Vong."

Tahiri and Scut nodded as one, apparently thankful for his correction. Tahiri said, "They are, which is why, in theory, this kind of ship *might* work. I haven't been on Zonama in ten years, so I'm not sure what kind of advances they've made."

"We'd love to get inside," Sharr said, "But we're not sure how given the ventral damage. It looks like the underside's all been melted together"

"Sekotan ships generally have an extra dorsal hatch," Tahiri said. "If we can get onto the top of the ship, there should be some kind of entrance. Barring that," she tapped her lightsaber, "We can always cut through the cockpit windshield."

"But that is a *last* resort," Scut insisted.

Tahiri nodded. "Someone has to have a ladder."

They did, but it took another fifteen minutes to get one over from the far side of the hangar. Once they got it, they used it to climb on top of the main starboard wing. As she tentatively stepped onto the ship, Jesmin was impressed by how smooth the material was. She felt liable to slip right off the gently curved surface of the wing. Tahiri seemed to have no such trouble, and the smaller woman clambered onto the main hull with ease. Huhunna followed, and the two began to inspect the topside of the vessel. Jesmin glanced down at Sharr and Scut, still standing at the base of the ladder. She sighed, then called on those little Force tricks she could muster and used it to pull herself up to the top of the ship.

By the time she got there, Tahiri and Huhunna had already found the rectangular hatch that led into the ship. Huhunna gave it a few good tugs, but when her Wookiee strength didn't work, Tahiri plucked her lightsaber off her belt, ignited it, and made to shallow cuts in the surface of the vessel. Huhunna tried again and was able to pull the hatch open.

The Jedi dropped in first, followed by the Wookiee. Jesmin peered down into the dark ship, found a little more of that Force energy, and jumped down, cushioning her own fall. The deck seemed to be made of the same material as the hull, though its surface was rougher to provide traction. The walls, however, felt as smooth as the outside of the ship.

Huhunna flicked on her glowlamp and Jesmin did the same, though Tahiri held her lightsaber in front of her with two hands, partially for illumination and partially to ward off unpleasant surprises. She led the way toward the cockpit slowly, examining every nook and cranny in the corridor.

Jesmin could tell when they reached the cockpit by the pale light shining through the windscreen. She could tell it was not transparisteel, but some kind of organic material that refracted the natural light slightly, like a flattened gemstone.

Huhunna made a low groan, and that was when Jesmin spotted the corpse slumped in the pilot's seat.

"Yuuzhan Vong," Tahiri said evenly.

She stepped up close and the glow of her lightsaber revealed two dangling arms, a body slumped to one side, and a face hidden by some sort of mask that was connected by umbilical cord to the console. From what Jesmin could tell, the console was also Yuuzhan Vong technology, roughly grafted onto what had probably once been mechanical equipment.

"The decompression got him," Tahiri said as turned off the lightsaber and she took the face-mask off the pilot.

Jesmin looked away from that twisted, ugly face and said, "We didn't see any breach in the hull."

"It must have been a hairline fracture, enough to vent all the atmosphere," Tahiri said. "We'll have to give it a better look."

Huhunna groaned assent.

Tahiri held the mask in her hand and stared at it, as if tempted to put it on.

"That's how they control ships, right?" Jesmin asked. "Some kind of... direct neural interface?"

"That's right. Most beings can do it, though it's designed for Yuuzhan Vong use." Something in her tone made 'Yuuzhan Vong' sound like 'us' instead of 'them.'

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"Well, I'll stick with buttons and a joystick, thank you very much," Jesmin said.

Huhunna grunted her agreement.

Tahiri was still staring at the mask. She clipped her lightsaber to her belt and took it in both hands. Huhunna barked an interrogative, and Tahiri said, "I'm going to try something. Jesmin, if it looks like I'm in pain, get out your lightsaber and cut the cord."

"Whoa, hey," Jesmin said. "Don't you think you should-"

"No," said Tahiri, and she put the mask on.

Jesmin drew in a deep breath and put a hand on her lightsaber, but nothing happened. The smaller woman simply stood in the dim light of the cockpit, holding the mask to her face with both hands. Just when Jesmin thought nothing was going to happen, her shoulders shook a little. Jesmin took the lightsaber off her belt and looked at Huhunna, wondering what to do, but the Wookiee just shrugged her broad shoulders.

Tahiri made a gasping noise and keeled forward. One hand grabbed the pilot's chair for purchase. Jesmin flipped on her lightsaber, filling the room with a dim violet glow. She held it in both hands and stepped forward, wondering if she should cut that umbilical cord, wondering *how* she should cut it with Tahiri standing half-turned away from her.

Then Tahiri's free hand took the mask off. She was gasping for air and something damp- sweat of some kind of saliva from the mask- made her face gleam in the glow from Jesmin's lightsaber.

"Put that away," Tahiri rasped. "Put it away *now*."

Jesmin did as she was told. She was relieved not to have used it, but still frightened by what had happened.

Huhunna barked a question. Tahiri said, "This ship isn't dead yet. Probably won't be long, though. It's definitely dying."

"What can we do?" Jesmin asked. "Can we save it?"

"I don't know. The technology is... too strange. Too *mixed*. But it doesn't matter." Tahiri wiped some dampness from her scarred forehead. "There's information in this ship. We have to get at it. It might have information on the Yuuzhan Vong fleet, or the renegades..." She licked her lips and let her eyes settle on Jesmin's. "It might even show us the way to Zonama Sekot."

Chapter 8

Elscol Loro and Bren Arefja, looking dignified and official in their white, gold-trimmed dress uniforms, stood in *Phoenix's* main conference room, waiting for their new friends to arrive.

Arefja had made the conscious choice not to personally greet Daala's party in the hangar bay. They would be provided with a military escort and taken to the conference room, but Arefja would not go so far as to roll a carpet across his deck and bow down to his new Imperial masters. Bren Arefja was no fool and nobody's toady, and while that gave Elscol some comfort, it wasn't enough.

Nothing could make her feel good about having Natasi Daala on this ship. The woman was a dictator and a war criminal and in a just universe she should have been executed long ago, but somehow, probably through sheer tenacity, the old crone had clung to life and kept fighting anyone and everything that got in her way. Even now, defeated and disgraced, she was trying to claw her way back on top by exterminating the Vong and playing hero. Daala was a woman who probably *had* to keep fighting wars, because it was the only thing she knew.

Elscol did admit, reluctantly, that she and Daala had a few things in common. It was not something she chose to dwell on.

Arefja's comlink buzzed in his pocket. He fished it out with a silvery paw and brought it to his lips. "Report."

"Guests received," a tinny voice said. "Will arrive in four minutes."

"Thank you. Lead, out."

Arefja flicked off the comlink and put it back in his pocket. He glanced at Elscol and raised one eyebrow in imitation of human curiosity.

"I don't like this," Elscol said.

"Neither do it. But it may not be the worst thing."

"Isn't it?" Elscol scowled. Best to get it out now. "The Empire killed my husband. I fought them for decades. I'm not going to lick that woman's boots, not now, not ever."

"What do you suggest, we fight her here? We have a larger fleet, but not large enough. Any battle will cripple us. We need to save our energy for the Vong, and if Daala wants to help us fight them, so be it."

"You can't trust her."

"I don't trust her and she'll never trust us. We could, however, help each other. Especially if the Alliance has sent another fleet after us, which they almost certainly have."

Elscol scowled and said nothing. Arefja, as usual, had reason on his side. They were deep in unknown space, searching for an enemy whose strength they didn't know. Any ally, even a temporary one, would be useful here. Still, hatred ran deep in Elscol. Despite their polite, democratic front of late, the Empire revolted her almost as much as the Vong.

When the door to the conference room slid open, two Alliance soldiers in blue fatigues stepped in first, rifles clutched at their chests. Then Daala stepped in. Like Elscol, her red hair was mostly gone to gray, but it was still tied in a long braid at her back. Unlike Elscol, she seemed at home in her crisp white uniform. She was taller than either Elscol or Arefja and she seemed to glower down at them with her one visible eye.

"Admiral Daala," the Bothan said firmly, "I am Admiral Bren Arefja. Welcome to *Phoenix*, flagship of the True Victory Fleet."

Daala's lips curled into a tight smile. She extended a hand. "Thank you for having me, Admiral. It is a pleasure to meet you."

Arefja reached out and shook. When their hands separated Daala glanced over her shoulder. "I would like to introduce the rest of my party."

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"Of course," Arefja said. They both stood with stiff backs and squared shoulders and firm, authoritative voices. Arefja was doing a good job of looking intimidat-ing but he was still just a short, furry Bothan faced against a lean, battle-scarred harridan.

Another Imperial came through the doorway. He was dressed in a Moff's uniform and had his steel-gray hair slicked back. Everything from his short blade of a nose to regal bearing recalled the Imperial aristocracy of old.

Then Boba Fett stepped in behind him.

Elscol had never seen the infamous bounty hunter in person. She'd heard about what had happened after Jacen Solo's war, where the Imperials had launched a nanovirus targeting Fett genes into the atmosphere of Mandalore but had no idea what he was doing in his exile.

Apparently, he was still close with Daala.

"We do not allow weapons in this conference," Arefja snapped angrily.

"Mr. Fett surrendered his rifle to your guards," Daala said evenly.

"Mr. Fett *is* a weapon," Arefja said firmly. "I cannot allow him to take part in these proceedings."

Daala glanced at the bounty hunter, like she was trying to read something in the red-and-green face of his battle-scarred Mandalorian helmet.

Finally, she said, "Agreed, though I promised Mr. Fett he would have audience to this conversation, as a full partner in my enterprise. May he leave a recording device here?"

Elscol fought the urge to say no. Instead she stood at Arefja side, eyes on the silent, looking bounty hunter, and heard the Bothan say, "He may, but only if he waits at the shuttle."

"Very well," Fett's voice rasped. It sounded detached over the speakers of his helmet. He drew something from his utility belt and placed it at the head of the table, then turned and walked out of the room.

Tension drained, but only a little. Arefja said to his guards, "Leave us. Take Mr. Fett back to the shuttle."

The guards nodded and left the four of them standing in the conference room. Arefja waved a paw at the table, and they took their seats: Elscol and Arefja on one side, Daala and the moff on the other side. Bob Fett's recorder sat at the end of the table. Elscol couldn't tell if it was receiving video as well as audio, but she was sure it was broadcasting live into that bucket he wore on his head.

Daala put that polite, tight smile back on and said, "This is Drikl Lecersen, a very resourceful ally of mine. And who is your associate?"

"This is Elscol Loro, captain of the *Phoenix*."

"A pleasure, Captain," Daala nodded at her.

"Thank you," Elscol grunted, but did not return the compliment.

Daala probably noticed, and apparently chose to ignore the slight. She looked back at Aref'ja and said, "I would like to compliment you, Admiral. You've put together an impressive fleet."

"So have you," Aref'ja said.

It wasn't impressive, Elscol thought. It was a collection of old relics and literal museum pieces. The only impressive thing was *Chimaera*, freshly stolen from whatever Imperial mausoleum they'd put it in. She hoped Aref'ja had more to offer besides baseless compliments.

"I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage, Admiral," Daala said. "I assume you are familiar with parts of my career, but I am not familiar with yours. I assume you have some experience with the Yuuzhan Vong, since you are clearly out here, hunting them."

"I am," Aref'ja said. "I served during the war under Admiral Kre'fey. As you know, the Bothans declared ar'krai, total war, on the Vong. The Admiral relented after we retook Coruscant and allowed them to flee back into the Unknown Regions. Many of our people did not accept that decision, including myself."

"It has been fifteen years since the Yuuzhan Vong disappeared," Daala said. "Why did you decide to launch an attack now?"

"It took a great deal of time and effort to gather a fleet and people to crew it," Aref'ja said. "I have a large network backing me in the Alliance. Many Bothan military, intelligence, and businessbeings, of course, but also beings inside the Alliance military are sympathetic to my cause."

"Yes, but it couldn't have taken fifteen years," Daala pressed. "Why *now*?"

"Admiral Daala, you know as well as I do that the Alliance has reeled from one disaster to another since the Vong war ended. The crisis with the Killiks, Jacen Solo's war, and then the 'incident' with the mad Jedi that brought down your government and burned down half of Coruscant in the process. Something has to be done, and the chaos on Coruscant gave us an opportunity to put plans into motion. There could be no other time *but* now to act."

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Elscol could see he was playing to his audience. Daala was an ambitious woman, and solving the Vong problem could easily catapult her back into power in either the Empire or the Alliance. Moff Lecersen looked intrigued also.

"So tell me, Admiral," the moff said, "We know you have had engagement with the Yuuzhan Vong already. Do you know their current whereabouts?"

Arefja shook his head. "I'm sorry, but no. My contacts in the Bothan spy network have been most helpful, but after our first two engagements with the Vong we lost track of their fleet. I was hoping some intelligence-sharing would be in both our interest."

He was saying up front that his intelligence sources were Bothan, and Elscol admired his misdirection. Just as when he stoked Daala's hopes of ascension, he hid from them the fact that this whole mad quest had been sparked by messages from a mysterious intelligence source, a source that had promised to give them total revenge against the Vong. Since the Jedi had intercepted that message on Tatooine, the source had gone silent, and the True Victory Fleet was now drifting into the unknown without a real plan.

"We have our sources as well, which we would be interested in sharing given certain conditions," Lecersen said, though his tone implied *I* instead of *we*. Elscol wondered if he and Daala were true partners or just another pair of convenient allies.

"I was hoping to share more than that," Daala spread her hands in an inviting gesture. "We have much to offer each other, Admiral Arefja. Combined, I believe our forces stand a better chance of defeating the Yuuzhan Vong fleet. Do you disagree?"

Arefja shook his head. "I cannot argue with numbers."

"Excellent," Daala said. "I suggest we begin discussing the conditions to our partnership."

Arefja fur began to bristle. "If we're going to act as partners, I want to *be* partners."

"Of course," Daala said. "You have more ships than we do. I personally don't expect much difficulty. Our differences are in the past. After all, we *are* united by a common enemy."

"This is true," Aref'ja said. "However, as you may or may not be aware, the Alliance has sent vessels into the Unknown Regions, hoping to stop us before we escalate things into a full-scale war."

Neither Daala nor Lecersen betrayed surprise. The moff said, "Would you refuse to fire on Alliance vessels, Admiral?"

"Not necessarily," Aref'ja said carefully. He and Elscol had already talked this through. "We will fire if fired upon, and if we have to fight them to the death, we will. But we will not attack first."

"An admirable policy," Daala said. "It strikes the balance between mercy and determination."

"Our reports also suggest there are Imperials in that fleet," Elscol spoke up. "Is your policy the same?"

She felt Aref'ja bristle in anger beside her, but she kept her eyes on Daala. They all knew Daala had demonstrated her willingness to fire on fellow Imperials during her recent skirmishes against Jagged Fel.

"I do not savor the idea of firing on fellow Imperials, *or* Alliance ships," Daala said. "I came out here to kill Yuuzhan Vong. However, I will do what I have to in order to achieve that purpose. And that included firing on Imperial vessels."

A grim smile cut on Lecersen's face. "I think we should all remember why we're here. We're here to exterminate the Yuuzhan Vong. In other words, to commit genocide."

His cold eyes drifted from Aref'ja to Elscol. She restrained a small shudder. She was used to hot anger, thrived on it in fact, but Lecersen's ruthlessness was something else. It made her prefer Daala's familiar anger.

"I know what we're here to do," Elscol said. "I won't flinch at killing Vong."

She wouldn't flinch at killing Imperials either, if it came to that, but she would never say it out loud. At least not to these people.

Daala said, "It's possible we may find allies in the fleet that has been sent after us. They may also be fiercer enemies than the Vong. Either way, we must treat them as an important piece in the game."

"I've stated my policy," Aref'ja said.

"We will respect that," Daala said. "Likewise, we will respect your command, Admiral. All the ships in your fleet are yours to command and I

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will not attempt to undercut your authority so long as you do not undercut mine."

"I doubt your crews would follow *me*, Admiral," Aref'ja folded his paws on the table.

"Likely not," Daala admitted. "I request that you consult me before making any major strategic decisions, and in to maintain clear communications in combat situations."

"As long as you promise to do the same," Aref'ja said.

"Of course," Daala nodded.

Elscol fought a scowl. The woman had made a wreck of her short term as Alliance Chief of State, in no small part because she was no team player. She knew nothing about cooperation. She only knew how to subdue her enemy, and her disastrous handling of the Jedi issue showed how that could work out.

"I have one other request," Daala said. "I would like to leave a small team of observers on *Phoenix*. You are, of course, welcome to send your own delegation to *Chimaera*."

Aref'ja's long face drooped in a scowl. "What would the purpose of this be?"

"To further trust and cooperation between our crews, of course," Daala said.

Elscol said, "You aren't going to build trust by sending spies."

"Some would say spying *builds* trust," said Lecersen.

"Don't give me that!" Elscol snapped. "We would never-"

"If you don't accept observers, the deal is off," Daala said simply.

Aref'ja bore his fangs. "You can't be serious. Such a precondition-"

"You will either take it, or we leave you to fight the Vong on your own," Daala said. "And next time we meet, we will not be allies."

"This is preposterous. This is extortion-"

"We are offering you the chance to put a team of your own onboard *Chimaera*," Lecersen said. "Even armed, if you wish."

"Armed?" Elscol stiffened in realization and rage. "No. I am *not* allowing Boba Fett to stay on my ship!"

"You're welcome to try and buy him away from me, if you wish," Daala said with a small smile.

Elscol nearly lurched across the table to smack her in the face, but Aref'ja arm shot out and restrained her in her seat.

The Bothan said, "Will you step outside, Admiral? And take Mr. Fett with you. It will only be a minute."

Daala and Lecersen, as polite a pair of snakes as you could find, rose and left the room. On her way out, Daala plucked Fett's transceiver and put it in her pocket,

"You can't do it!" Elscol pulled out of her chair and angrily paced the room. "You can't let that killing machine on our ship!"

"If not Fett, then Daala will send her own commandos," Aref'ja said as he rose from his chair. "And frankly I'd rather have Fett."

"Why?" Elscol spat.

"Because Daala was right. Fett is buyable. He's *reasonable*. He's not a wind-up tin soldier who will do whatever Daala orders."

"He's one of the deadliest men in the galaxy."

"He's also old. He's an exile, even if he does have other Mandalorians with him. Would you, Elscol, really have Imperial commandos onboard?"

"It's too much," Elscol shook her head vehemently. "All of this is too much. She acts clean and reasonable and then she puts a knife to your throat."

"What do you *want* me to do?" Aref'ja shouted. His fur stood on end, his eyes blazed angrily, and his lips curled back to bare predatory canines.

Elscol froze where she was. She hadn't seen Aref'ja's rage since the Vong War. He seemed so professional and calm during this entire mission that she'd forgotten the anger he kept buried beneath his cool silvery exterior.

"We are fighting for our survival, alone, with *no help*!" Aref'ja bellowed. "Even if we don't die fighting we could be *executed* as traitors to the Alliance! We need every ally we can get, Elscol, every *single* one!"

His anger disappeared as quickly as it came. His body shuddered, his fur flattened, and he closed his mouth over his fangs. He looked guilty, ashamed at letting his anger show.

"Please," he said, almost pleading. "We have to make some sacrifices."

Elscol swallowed. "You know, there are worlds where they tell stories of people who sell their souls to demons because they think it will get them what they want."

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"I know," Aref'ja said. He bore his fangs again, this time in an angry smile. "Good thing I lost my soul a long time ago."

Elscol didn't know how to respond. It had been a long time since she'd lost hers too.

"Bring them in," Aref'ja pointed at the door. "And please, be kind to our new *friends*."

The portable transmitter which Boba Fett used to view the conference had only a limited range, but barring scratches of static it was sufficient for him to stand outside the shuttle and watch the proceedings. When Daala carried it back into the conference room after being momentarily excused, he could see, even through the small low-resolution image inset on his helmet's head's up display, the look of defeat on Captain Loro's face. For a moment the feisty old woman had reminded Fett a little of Admiral Daala herself, but unlike Daala, it seemed she knew how to take someone else's orders.

For good or ill, it also meant he would be seeing a lot more of Captain Loro, and her cool Bothan commander.

Fett didn't need to see the rest. He turned off the data feed and climbed the ramp into the shuttle. Sitting in the cargo compartment, slouched a little awkwardly in their heavy armor, were a trio of Mandalorians.

"Good thing you packed your bags," Fett said. "We're staying."

Dinua Jeban's violet helmet angled in his direction and voice buzzed in his ear. "Do we get our own bunks or do we have to share?"

"That's being decided," Fett deadpanned.

He was more curious as to the opinions of the other two. Dinua was a good Mando girl; he'd fought with her against the Vong twenty years back and he trusted her. He was less sure about Jaller and Bess Skirata. They weren't openly hostile to him like Mereel and Jaing were, but they probably picked up the same crazy ideas from their clone grandparents.

Jaller rose to his feet. His armor was the same deep red as his hair, with blue paint framing the T-shape of his visor. He said, "Fine by me. I bet we'll get lots of fun looks from the Alliance boys."

Bess picked her blue-armored body off the crate. "How long are we going to be on this job, *Mand'alor*?"

He couldn't hear any mocking when she said his title, which was a good start, he supposed. He said, "No idea. Hope you packed for the long term."

He wasn't in the mood to chat, so he turned and went for the shuttle cockpit. The cramped space was empty for the moment, and he had to bend low to keep from banging his head on something important. He calibrated the comlink to an encrypted frequency, one that even the Imperials hadn't cracked yet.

After a few seconds, a flickering miniature image appeared in front of Fett. Even painted blue by the low-quality holo, Fett could see all the different shades of Venku's miss-matched armor plating.

"We're going to be a while," he said plainly. "Take care of things on *Chimaera*."

Venku inclined his head in acknowledgement. By putting Venku in charge instead of Carid or Zerimar, Fett was showing the Skirata clan a level of trust he hoped they'd reciprocate. Venku commanded respect from the wild old Null troopers and their whole clan in a way Fett himself never understood, but if he could get Venku to take orders, the rest would follow.

"Should I keep this frequency open?" Venku asked.

"Don't want the Imps to decrypt it. Rotate freqs every two hours. That should keep them on their toes."

"Understood."

"You're to follow Daala's orders unless I say otherwise, you understand?" Fett said. "And that means *all* of you, including the old clones."

"You don't have to worry about Jaing and Mereel," Venku sounded like he resented the implication.

"And the Jedi," Fett said. "Keep him in line."

"*Bard'ika* is the least of your worries."

"Probably right there." Fett snorted. "Tell your boys not to worry. I'll take good care of Jaller and Bess."

"I'll hold you to that. *Mand'alor*."

That time he said it not mockingly, not reprovably, but as a firm reminder of the duty he had to his people. The duty some people thought he had, anyway, Venku foremost among them.

"We'll talk later. Fett, out," he said, and punched off the transmission.

He stood for a long moment, half-hunched over, looking at the empty hangar deck in front of him. He sighed inwardly, then headed back into the

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cargo room. He wondered if all of this would finally be worth it, if he would finally get what he'd been after all along.

He didn't know what he'd do if actually *got* the antidote to Lecersen's nanovirus, but at least it gave him a goal. When you got to be as old as Fett, you always needed something to get you out of bed in the morning.

After Miranda Fardreamer left, Myri Antilles resigned herself to another twenty-four hours without anyone to talk to. For a while after her lunch she lay face-up on her bunk, staring at the ceiling, trying to stave off the horrible boredom of being a prisoner. It was tempting to close her eyes and drift easily off to sleep, because there was absolutely nothing better to do, but she still tried to keep some semblance of a normal person's schedule. She tried to eat and sleep and even exercise at regular times, just to keep her body functioning in a normal rhythm, though the longer they kept her in this cushioned cage, the harder captivity became.

She was perilously close to closing her eyes and giving in when there was a buzz at her door. She immediately flipped herself off the bed and onto her feet, pulled the hair out of her face, and said, "Come in."

The door slid open and Miranda walked in. She'd only been gone a few hours and Myri was surprised, all the more so by the expression on the teenager's face. It was some curious combination of empathy, regret, and frustration, and Myri knew Miranda wasn't thinking of her, but of something else.

"Hey," Myri said. "Fancy seeing you here."

Miranda nodded. "I came to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" Myri frowned, confused. "Are you going to another ship?"

"I am," Miranda nodded. "I'm part of a delegation that's being sent to Admiral Daala's flagship."

Myri stared, trying to wrap her mind around those words.

Miranda said, "We've encountered another fleet search-ing for the Vong. They're Imperials, led by Admiral Daala."

"Whoa," Myri said. She couldn't think of anything to say, so she repeated, "Whoa."

"Yes." Miranda nodded grimly. "They're sending me along with a group of commandos as part of some kind of... exchange. Mutual spies, maybe."

"Mutual hostages," Myri muttered, still trying to wrap her head around the latest turn of events. She understood that Aref'ja might want allies in his hunt for the Vong, but he had to know any partnership with Daala would end badly.

"Maybe," Miranda admitted. "But the Imps sent over Boba Fett, and I wouldn't call him a hostage to anybody."

"Boba Fett?" Myri gaped. This was getting more unbelievable by the minute.

"And a couple other Mandos to keep an eye on us," Miranda said bitterly.

"This is crazy," Myri said. "I mean, crazier than it already was. You have to know that. You're not stupid."

"No, I'm not," the teenager said defensively. She hugged herself, displaying rare vulnerability. "I screwed up before. This means they either see me as expendable, or they're giving me a chance to redeem myself. Either way, I can't disobey an order. So I'm going to go to *Chimaera*. Maybe I'll see you again. Or not, I don't know."

So Daala had Thrawn's old flagship, and Boba Fett doing her fighting for her. The old lady just might win a death-brawl against the Yuuzhan Vong like that, but Myri didn't know if that made her feel better or worse.

"So what happens to me?" Myri asked. "Does someone *else* bring me lunch now?"

"I can't say. All I know is..." Miranda trailed off. She stared at the floor, trying to find the right words. Finally, she took two steps forward and extended a hand for Myri to shake. She said, "Good luck, Antilles."

Myri took it and shook. She tried to put strength in it. "Good luck yourself, Fardreamer. You're gonna need it."

"We all will." Miranda stepped back. She looked like she wanted to say a hundred different things and had no place to start.

Myri offered, "Keep your head down and don't get in her way. That's a good start."

"I suppose so." Miranda frowned. She looked over her shoulder, like the guards would come any minute and drag her to her own kind of captivity.

Finally, she repeated, "Good luck, Antilles," turned, and walked out of the room.

The door locked tight behind her, leaving Myri still on her feet, staring at the closed portal. Eventually she staggered back to her bed and sat down.

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She curled her legs against her chest and rested her head on her knees. She felt more helpless and alone than ever.

Chapter 9

Jaina felt sublimely awkward as she stood side-by-side with Wynssa Fel. Two lines of three Chiss soldiers, a modest honor guard of a half-dozen, stretched out behind them. They were in *Celestials* secondary landing bay, watching the shuttle grow larger and larger against the blackness of space until it nearly filled the hangar's entry portal. Then, with a bigger wobble than it should have had, it passed through the atmospheric shield, extended its landing struts, and lowered itself onto the hangar floor. It came down not soundlessly, but with a wretched screeching noise as its landing struts skittered and scratched on the deck.

Then it was still.

The landing ramp lowered a minute later. Jaina was pleased to see Ben scamper down the ramp first. He was dressed in a plain gray vest and trousers but his lightsaber dangled from his belt and he had a fat satchel slung over one shoulder. When he got to the bottom of the ramp he extended warm feelings in the Force to Jaina and gave Wynssa a salute.

The blond woman tilted her head forward in acknowledgement. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Skywalker. I'm glad to see that you made it aboard in one piece. Were you having problems with your shuttle?"

Ben scratched his red hair, ruffling it, putting on a good confused-teenager act. "Yeah, I think there were some problems with the, um, the-"

"The hydraulic buffers," said the man coming down the ramp. He was of medium build with tanned skin and dark hair, and he was dressed in the typical uniform of an Alliance shuttle pilot.

"Do you require assistance?" Wynssa asked.

"We'll yell if we need it," the man gave her a crooked smile.

Wynssa took the rebuff easily. She probably assumed the Alliance would be as secretive about its tech as the Chiss. Even malfunctioning hydraulic buffers.

"I'm good with ships," Jaina said. "I'll take a look. Besides, if I'm going to be flying out of here I want to do it on a safe ride."

"Yeah, me too," the pilot said.

Jaina turned back to Wynssa. "Commodore Fel, you can give Ben a tour of the place. I'm sure he's got lots of questions."

"Of course." Wynssa cast a sideways glance at Ben as he gave the whole hangar deck a thorough look-over.

"Once we get the shuttle fixed I'll go back to my quarters and pick up my things," Jaina told her. "Then I'm off your boat and out of your hair. Sound good?"

Wynssa looked awkward, a rare thing. She felt a pang of regret for putting Wynssa through all this. Her sister-in-law had genuinely been trying to make amends, and Jaina's transfer off her ship must have seemed like a cruel rebuttal to those overtures. When she found out the whole truth, she'd be even more upset.

Jaina extended a hand. "In case I don't see you for a while."

Wynssa looked down at the extended hand, then at her face, then reached out and shook firmly.

"Sorry for all the trouble I've caused," Jaina said.

"Think nothing of it," Wynssa replied, then withdrew her hand and looked at Ben. "Mr. Skywalker, if you'd like to follow me."

"With pleasure, Commodore." Ben smirked. "Do we get the honor guard the whole way?"

Wynssa glanced over her shoulder at the six Chiss and snapped her fingers twice. Four peeled away and marched off into the nearest hallway, while two stepped closer to their commander.

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"Well," Ben said, "I guess that's more manageable?"

Wynssa pointed to the far hallway. "If you'll follow me, Mr. Skywalker."

As the four of them walked off, the pilot yelled, "Hey, if we *do* need help, who do we ask?"

"Deck management is there," Wynssa pointed toward the windows of a second-level observation deck in the opposite corner of the room.

"Great. Thanks," the pilot tipped a small salute. Jaina stood next to him as they watched Wynssa, Ben, and the guards exit the hangar.

When the door slid shut behind them, the pilot said, "Well, want to take a look inside?"

"You bet," Jaina said, and rolled up her sleeves eagerly.

As they ascended the ramp and climbed into the interior of the shuttle, the pilot said, "I'm Thaymes, by the way. Wraith Squadron."

"Good to meet you," Jaina said.

Even though they were inside the shuttle and safe from Chiss surveillance devices, she kept her voice low. Thaymes led her into the passenger room, where two Chiss were waiting. They wore perfectly accurate CEDF uniforms, their skin was the right shade of blue, and their eyes both glowed that eerie red. One of them was invisible in the Force.

"You're the Yuuzhan Vong," she told him.

The man let out a small groan. "This is why I do not hang around Jedi."

Jaina favored him with a smile. "Nice masquer, though. Did you grow it yourself?"

"Before we left Alliance space," he nodded. "Garik Loran thought it might be useful. Call me Scut."

"A pleasure," Jaina said, though deep down it seemed strange to be standing in the same room with a man invisible in the Force. She'd spent five years of her life fighting the Yuuzhan Vong, and after that her brother had taken to hiding his own Force presence as he fell deeper and deeper into the dark. She knew she'd be putting her life in Scut's hands very soon, but her instincts found it hard to trust a man she couldn't sense with her Jedi powers.

With a little effort, she turned her attention to the other fake Chiss. "You must be the Clawdite," she said.

"Turman Durra, at your service." He did a little bow.

"You've got the face looking pretty good. What about the eyes?"

"Removable implants."

"What's it like looking through those anyway?" Thaymes asked.

"I see red. Literally and all the time." Turman groaned. "So let's do this and get out of here before I get a massive headache. Massive-er."

"How long do you think this will take?" Thaymes asked.

Jaina shrugged. "I have no idea. It depends where the Chiss laboratory is, who's working there..."

"Want me to keep the engines on standby while you go do your sneaky spy stuff?"

Jaina shook her head. "No. That would get them suspicious. Just wait here and pretend to fiddle with the ship sometimes."

"That I can do," Thaymes said. "Good luck to all of you. You might need it."

"Hey, we've got a bona fide Jedi Master on our side," Turman grinned.

"Believe me, we can't fix everything," Jaina said. "And stop smiling. That's the best way to look un-Chiss-like."

"So what is looking Chiss-like? Stern and dour all the time? Should I scowl wherever we go?"

"No," Jaina said. "Just look like you're bottling up all your emotions until you're full of repressed anger and quiet hatred for the universe."

"Sounds easy," Scut said. "Let's get started."

"Tell me about your lightsaber," Tahiri asked, out of the blue, when they were sitting on top of the Sekotan ship.

"Excuse me?" Jesmin blinked.

Sharr and Huhunna were inside the ship, hooking its bowels up to electrical systems Scut suggested could infuse energy into the dying vessel and prolong its life. Tahiri had spent over an hour that morning with the pilot's mask on her face, unsuccessfully trying to interface more fully with the vessel's mind.

At the moment, the two of them were taking air and sitting next to the entry hatch, the door of which had been cut away so they could better feed down the massive tangle of cables that were now being hooked up to what had been the shuttle's engine room before the Yuuzhan Vong tore out said engines and implanted a dovin basal.

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"Your lightsaber," Tahiri said. "You're no Jedi."

"No, I'm not," Jesmin allowed. She was surprised to hear Tahiri ask the question. From all she'd seen so far, the woman was businesslike and focused, not given to personal chit-chat.

"Then what are you?" she pressed.

"Well, in Wraith Squadron you get to be a little of everything," Jesmin smiled, evasive. Tahiri kept looking at her, so she added, "I'm a pilot. And I do some slicing. I spent a few with the Antarian rangers, so I have some combat training. And that's useful for Wraith Squadron. So's having a little Jedi training. Garik Loran is big on versatility."

"You weren't in the Maw during the Yuuzhan Vong War, were you?"

"No, thankfully." Jesmin repressed a shudder. She'd heard from her brother about all the psychosis those students later suffered from thanks to their exposure to Abeloth, the ancient Force-being hidden in the Maw and later freed after the destruction of Centerpoint Station.

"So after the War, then? On Ossus?"

Jesmin nodded. "I was a little old then, which might have been part of the reason I washed out. Plus I was never really that strong." She sighed, recalling old disappointments. "My mother is Tyria Sarkin, have you met her?" Tahiri nodded. "She wasn't that strong either, and she trained late, but she became a Jedi. For a while I thought I could take a round-about path like her, but I guess I just didn't have it in me."

"Not everyone who has the Force has to be a Jedi," Tahiri said. "Did you make that lightsaber at Ossus?"

"Yeah, with a little help from Mom," Jesmin ran her hand over its cool, smooth metal surface. "I was actually better at lightsaber stuff that just about anything else. Nowadays it's mostly good for impressing people, kind of like what little Force skills I could pick up, mostly TK and some ability to sense people's thoughts and feelings, but mostly that just makes me look perceptive."

"Nothing wrong with that."

"No. There isn't."

"How long have you been with the Wraiths?"

"Well, that's a little hard to say, since *technically* we're not called the Wraiths since *technically* we don't exist. Technically we're just a bunch of people Garik Loran sends on special tasks. But, practically speaking, almost

two years. Which is a lot longer than I was at the Academy. Or with the Antarians. Or bounty hunting. Or just about anything else, really."

"You were a bounty hunter?" Tahiri cocked a brow.

"I dabbled," Jesmin admitted. "Kind of, anyway. I went by the name Zilaash Kuh."

"I know you!" Tahiri said, surprisingly forceful. "You helped capture the Horn kids for Admiral Daala!"

"Technically, I *didn't* help her, I just *looked* like I did," she insisted. "It was Mom's idea, actually. I pretend like I'm helping Daala while the Jedi go in and save the Horn kids. Sabotage her efforts, basically."

"Interesting..." A small, rare smile appeared on Tahiri's face. "I worked a little as a bounty hunter at the same time. The news reports kept talking about a blond woman with a lightsaber who was hunting Jedi, and I wondered if I was having some weird amnesia and forgot what I did last night."

Jesmin chuckled. "Nope, that was all me."

"Well... It's good you helped the Horns."

"Yeah, well, we Jedi have to stick together. Or, you know, Force-sensitive Jedi-like people."

Tahiri's smile wilted a little, but she nodded.

Jesmin sighed. "You know, I've been a lot of things, but for a while I thought that this might be a keeper. I was working with good people. I was carrying on the family tradition. Not just being a Wraith, but blowing stuff up and using the Force every now and then."

Tahiri watched her closely. "And now?"

"I don't know." Jesmin ran a hand through her hair. "We lost Myri Antilles on our last mission. Myri, Wedge Antilles' daughter."

"The captain's sister."

"That's right," Jesmin nodded. "I'd known her forever. Now that she's dead, it just feels like..."

"You're missing something you can never, ever get back," Tahiri said.

"Yeah. Pretty much."

Jesmin was surprised to be admitting this much to Tahiri, but through their dim Force bond she sensed real empathy. It was easier to let her guard down here than with her fellow Wraiths.

Tahiri reached up and gently touched the marks on her forehead. "The things about scars is that they never go away. You just have to learn to live with them, and work around them, and maybe draw strength from them."

"Yeah..." Jesmin said softly. "I think I know what you mean."

"The important thing is not to let your scars become you," Tahiri said. Jesmin could feel her pain and deep knowledge even without the Force. "I've had times where it felt like there was nothing left of me *but* scars. And I think... I think *he* felt the same way."

Jesmin didn't have to ask. Somehow she knew that *he* was Jacen Solo.

Tahiri continued, "But there's more to you than just scars. Eventually you'll get so used to them you don't even notice them in the mirror anymore."

"Time heals all wounds?" Jesmin asked.

"No," Tahiri shook her head. "It just dims the pain."

Jesmin looked down at her lightsaber. Its hilt felt strong and comforting beneath her palm. "Well, thanks for the Jedi wisdom."

Tahiri shook her head. "I'm not a Jedi."

Jesmin blinked. "I'm sorry. I thought-"

"Not really. I know I've come back to the Order, more or less, but..." she shook her head again. "I've been Jedi, Sith, Yuuzhan Vong hybrid, bounty hunter, addict, traitor, a big bundle of scars... I'm just a changeling."

Her face got a distant look, and her presence shrank inward in the Force. Jesmin muttered, "I think I know the feeling."

That sat in silence for a while, watching deck crews crisscross the floor of the auxiliary hangar. They were jerked out of private reveries by the clanging of feet and equipment inside the ship.

"Need any help?" Jesmin called down.

"Modifications are a go," Sharr called. "A think we've given a little extra life to this bird."

"Great news," Tahiri said.

"Well," Sharr said, "If you wanna try that helm again..."

Tahiri sighed. "I'll give it a shot. I just wish Scut were here."

"Sorry," Jesmin said, "Secret mission."

"What kind of secret mission?"

"I honestly don't know. You know how it is with us Wraiths, we've got to be everywhere at once, doing everything for everybody..."

"Thankless labor, that's what it is," Sharr called.

"And for all the work we do we never get any credit..."

"We're heroes, really."

"I'd say martyrs."

Tahiri smiled and scooted over to the hatch. "I didn't realize you people still bantered like this."

"Silly Squadron tradition," Jesmin said. "Don't want to let our ancestors down."

"I'm *not* an ancestor!" Sharr shouted from below.

Tahiri rolled her eyes and dropped soundlessly into the belly of the ship.

Sneaking into a highly secure area on the flagship of a species known for paranoia and secrecy was never going to be easy, but having a Jedi, a Clawdite, and a masqueraded Yuuzhan Vong helped.

When she left the shuttle, it appeared to whatever watchers remained on the flight deck that she was being taken back to her quarters by a pair of Chiss sub-lieutenants. She led the way, but they followed close on either shoulder, hands at their sides, never looking in any direction but dead ahead even as she led Scut and Turman into parts of the ship they had never been before. She led them unerringly down one hallway, then another, past a Chiss officer who didn't bat a red eye, then around a corner to the lift that would, ordinarily, have taken them to her quarters.

When they stepped inside, no one was there. Jaina, Scut and Turman exhaled, just a little, in relief, but Jaina was not surprised. Through the Force she could feel even the cool, controlled presence of the Chiss, but there were none nearby.

They stepped inside and Jaina reached out with the Force to scramble the overhead camera. She stabbed the button to take them to Level 5 and said, "Keep alert. I'll go in front, but if anyone comes, I want Turman to step in front of me, like he's leading me."

"How will you let us know?" Turman asked.

Jaina clicked her tongue against the top of her mouth.

"Roger," Turman said. "Feel anything yet?"

"Can't tell," Jaina said. She felt the lift decelerate and all three of them shut up. The door slid open to an empty hallway. Jaina stepped out and

looked both ways. It seemed to be an empty passage like any other. She reached out with the Force and found a dim presence down the hall to her right. She stepped forward, and with a touch of the Force scrambled the hallway's camera. Turman and Scut followed. She kept on probing with the Force and found not one presence but two. She sensed not just typical Chiss discipline and composure but an inordinate level of focus.

She walked further down the hall until she reached a closed door and felt their energy behind it.

She glanced over at Scut and Turman, who stood a half-meter behind her, doing their best to look like straight-backed Chiss officers.

"Anyone know Cheunh?" she asked in a whisper.

Scut tapped the side of his head. "I have a translator built into my masquer. It can feed audio translations of Cheunh directly into my audial nerve."

"Nice," Jaina said. "Tizowym?"

Scut shook his head. "Not Yuuzhan Vong. Alliance tech."

"That works too. What about speaking?"

He shook his head. "Sorry."

Jaina tried not to show her frustration. She'd been hoping to distract the scientists inside by having Scut pose as a Chiss officer checking some mechanical mal-function, but that plan was useless if he couldn't speak their language.

Turman tapped her on the shoulder and pointed at the cables and pipelines running into the ceiling overhead. He whispered, "Any way to force an evacuation?"

"A mechanical malfunction would bring security here in minutes," Scut said.

"If we linger any longer they'll wonder what was up with the cameras," Jaina shook her head. She knew they were already lingering in the hallway longer than they should be, but at least she didn't sense any other presences nearby: just the two scientists and Turman. Scut's blank presence still unnerved her, and it took effort to keep her attention on the mission.

"Okay," she whispered, "We can try and trigger some-thing, drive them out."

"They will head to the lift," Scut said.

"Then we go the other way. Come on," Jaina said, and led them to the far end of the hall. She reached out in the Force before turning the corner, and when she did she quickly blurred the camera. Scut and Turman rounded it with her. She peeked back into the main hallway and whispered to them, "What do you recommend, guys?"

"Let me do it," Scut said. "I think that main pipeline overhead is the oxygen control feed."

"We don't want to knock them out," Turman said.

"No, but if their air starts decreasing they'll have to go."

"If their air decreases, so does ours," Jaina pointed out.

"Don't you have some Jedi magic tricks for that?" Turman asked.

"I may have the Force, but I still have to *breathe*."

"Sorry. Didn't know how that worked."

"Breathe slowly," Scut said. He reached into his uniform pocket and drew out a small container shaped like a petri dish. He explained, "My concoction. Based on blorash jelly. Very corrosive."

"Open 'er up," Jaina nodded. "I'll send it on its way."

Carefully, Scut unlocked the lid of the container. Jaina couldn't grab hold of the Yuuzhan Vong biotech itself with the Force, but she could pick the open container out of Scut's hand. She floated it down the hallway, not bothering to blur the camera this time, because she doubted the security viewers would pick up one tiny disc floating down the hall. When she got it close to the laboratory door, she gave the think a hard upward shake. The jelly smacked into the oxygen conduit and immediately began to corrode it. Jaina quickly reeled the empty container back in and send it right back into Scut's hands.

The Yuuzhan Vong stared at it dumbly. Turman muttered, "Pretty kriffing good."

Jaina waved them back behind the wall. They waited for one long moment, then another, before finally the door swung open. Jaina peeked her head around to see the two Chiss moving more hurriedly than she'd ever seen Chiss move; not quite a sprint, but more than a jog, they ran one fast straight line for the lift. It was there when they arrived and they quickly went through the doors. Then they slid shut and took the lift away.

"Now!" Jaina cried.

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She, Scut, and Turman ran into the hallway. She reached out with the Force and scrambled the camera again. When they reached the laboratory entrance the ID badge from one of the scientists sat in front of the closer door, right where Jaina had Force-pried it off his uniform as he ran.

Turman picked it up and said, "Pretty kriffing neat. You know, I wish Ranger had these kind of powers."

Scut shrugged helplessly. Jaina knew they didn't have time to waste, so she took the ID badge from Turman's hand and slapped it against the door's security scanner. The door slid open and Jaina led them both inside.

She immediately went woozy from the thinning air. It was already starting to drain from the main hallway but it really struck her once she was inside the laboratory. She barely remembered to scramble the lab's camera.

"If I were Alpha Red, where would I be?" Scut muttered aloud.

"That safe's a good place to start," Turman pointed to the half-meter-tall durasteel box in the far corner of the room. It had a swinging door on the upper portion, with another badge-scanner, screen, and keypad right below. The three of them scampered around the lab table to the safe and Jaina slapped the security badge against the safe's scanner. A small green light came on its door, and a second began blinking next to the small keypad.

"Oh fierfek," Jaina muttered.

"Hold on," Turman said, "Let me try something."

"Don't damage the safe," Jaina said. She was already getting woozy from lack of oxygen and braced herself against the wall.

Turman seemed to be getting tired too, but he furrowed his blue brows and narrowed his red eyes and reached out to touch the keypad, carefully, with his fingers. Jaina watched as his blue fingertips seemed to waver and lose shape. Each digit seemed press lightly against the buttons, too softly to trigger them, and melt before her eyes. She wondered if she really was about to pass out as she watched those blue digits blur across the keypad. Then they suddenly reformed, solidified, and pressed three buttons, one after another.

The safe's yellow light blinked red, then yellow again.

"Oh, please don't lock out," Turman muttered and pounded the keypad again. This time there was a slight beeping noise, the yellow light turned green, and the door opened.

They all crowded in to see a dozen thumb-sized vials of some pale liquid hanging from a centrifuge.

"Which one?" Scut asked. "Or are they all the same?"

"They *look* the same," Turman blinked. He was clearly getting tired also and braced himself against the safe. "Isn't it supposed to be *red*?"

Jaina gave a small push with the Force and made the centrifuge turn. The labels on the vials all appeared to be identical, so she stuck her hand in, plucked one vial, and carefully stuck it in the breast pocket of her vest.

"Okay," she panted, "Let's get out of here."

She swung the door of the safe shut and lurched for the door. She stumbled and nearly fell down to the floor but Scut grabbed her by the waist and hoisted her up. Turman made it out the door first, and Scut helped Jaina through. She barely had the presence of mind to scrub the camera in the hallway. They started for the lift but they could see a car rapidly heading to their floor.

"Oh *fierfek*," Jaina panted.

"Other way!" Scut tugged her back toward the secondary hallway.

Turman braced himself against the wall and followed. They rounded the corner and kept staggering even as they heard the sound of the lift door hissing open and boots clapping on the floor. Jaina saw another lift tube on the very far end of the hall. She reached out with the Force and, with a fumbling touch, depressed the call button to summon the lift. It arrived at their level just as they arrived. They threw themselves in and the lift door closed behind them, sealing them in a tight space where the air was thick and breathable again.

Suddenly alert again, Jaina summoned the Force to scramble the camera and bring the lift to a halt. For a long moment all three of them lay half-on-top of each other on the floor of the lift. All three of them gasped for breath until those gasps became choking laughter of relief.

"Oh *fierfek*!" Jaina said a third time. "Let's never do that again."

"Do you think they spotted us?" Scut asked.

"I hope not," Jaina reached out and touched the vial through the fabric of her vest. "We got what we came for."

"It had better be worth it," Scut said, thought a moment, then said, "Or not."

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Turman brayed stupid, lightheaded laughter and said, "Thank everything holy that you have bigger lungs than humans or Clawdites."

"It is useful," Scut allowed. "But what were those fingers? What did you *do* to that keypad?"

Turman held up a blue hand. "I *felt* the buttons. Clawdites have sensitive nerve-ending like you poor saps couldn't believe. I could tell three numbers were worn down from use. I just didn't know what *order* to press them in..."

"We got lucky," Jaina said.

"Yeah, well, I'll take luck," Turman said. "There is nothing wrong with luck at all."

Jaina couldn't disagree, but as she felt the vial she wondered how lucky any of them really were.

When she felt strong enough, she disentangled her legs from Turman's, rose to her feet, took a deep breath, and got them moving again.

Chapter 10

The newfound alliance between Daala's and Arefja's fleets was never going to amount to much unless they actually figured out where to go next. At the moment, both groups were operating on a notable dearth of intelligence, which meant that reconnaissance missions were in order.

As an initial offer of goodwill, *Chimaera* transmitted a collection of partially-completed star charts to *Phoenix*, which in turn transmitted its own partial map of the Unknown Regions. When combined, the data from Lecersen's agents and the Bothan spynet created a slightly more complete image of the space in which they were wandering.

It was, however, only a minor aid. What they truly needed were hints on either the Alliance or Vong locations. As for that, the only way was to keep sending out astronomical probes from *Phoenix* and *Sunbeam*. Considering how one of those probes had already led the Imperials to their location, Elscor Loro was not certain whether sending more out was a good idea.

The Imperials had their own plan. Manned stealth reconnaissance shuttles flew sorties out of *Resolve*. Both sides exchanged flight plans in advance, in the interest of maintaining clear communications and in preventing redundant searches.

The reconnaissance flights moved along at the same mechanical, slow pace they had before the fleet combined. Technically having more vessels searching meant they could cover more area at a faster pace, but in the end the Unknown Regions were vast and they were searching for two needles in a proverbial haystack. Not for the first time, Elscol wished their mysterious initial source would swoop in and give them key information once again, but that was unlikely. As far as she knew, they had never contacted Aref'ja through the same method twice, and she doubted they'd be able to communicate with them here in the Unknown Regions.

She knew others shared her frustration, though few dared voice it aloud. While coordinating the recon probes with *Sunbeam*, Terra Vatrim had allowed more than a few asides expressing her displeasure with the new alliance and a skepticism as to how long it would last. *Sunbeam's* captain was a hard old woman who reminded Elscol more than a little of herself, and she enjoyed watching Vatrim vent.

The other captains kept a tougher front. The Mon Cals, Ginus and Trev Varin, were almost cliquish, as were the Bothans. Though the latter shared a definite loyalty to Aref'ja, Captain Saiv'tu had also expressed some vocal displeasure during Elscol's last briefing with *Fey'lya's* captain. As for old Kalla Auburn, the ex-Imp took the reunion surprisingly in stride.

The other concern that weighed on her was the four Mandalorians. To say they were obtrusive would be an understatement. At all hours there were two of them on the bridge and two, presumably, resting in the quarters they had been billeted. She had sent twice as many commandos, plus Miranda Fardreamer, over to *Chimacra* as 'observers,' but these silent armored mercenaries surely had a much greater psychological effect on the crew. They rarely spoke, and when they did it was only to make brief inquiries. They loomed over your shoulder, observing everything you did through those black-visored, all-seeing helmets.

They never showed their faces, but at least, unlike stormtroopers, you could tell them apart by their armor. Boba Fett, with his red-and-green, was easy to tell. Then there was the one in purple-and-green armor, another in red-and-blue, and the last in all blue. With such heavy armor it was hard to tell anything about them. Elscol thought the purple one was female, and possibly the all-blue, but it was a vague guess based on mannerisms and hints of body shape. In truth, she didn't even know if they were human.

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Sometimes she thought she'd rather have Daala herself haunting the bridge. At least with her you could look into her eyes and tell where you stood. As it was, it was like having faceless hunter-killer droids stalking your every step. It was infuriating and terrifying and she tried very hard not to let it show.

They sent out recon flights for a day, a night, and then a morning. The crew worked in shifts and didn't slacken. Almost twenty hours after the search began, when most of the ship was placed on night-time rest shifts, *Phoenix* received a direct, high-priority transmission from *Chimaera*.

"Patch it through to this console, double-encrypted," Elscol told the communications crew as she headed to their station from her spot by the forward viewport. "Buzz the admiral. Get him up here."

Arefja was sleeping right now, or at least on rest shift, so he'd take at least five minutes to get to the bridge, probably more. That meant Elscol would have to manage whatever Daala wanted. When she got to the comm station, Fett and the blue-armored Mandalorian were already there, looming behind two seated comm officers.

"Signal's ready, captain," the comm lieutenant said. He was trying very hard not to look at the Mandos.

Elscol tried hard too. "Put her on," she said.

She shifted her attention to the holo that appeared. To her mild surprise, it was not Daala who appeared but Lecersen. She could make out the background image of Fardeamer hovering over his shoulder.

"Greeting, Moff Lecersen," Elscol said.

"Hello, Captain," the Moff gave a formal nod. "We're calling to report that our reconnaissance flight OB-1176 has made a notable encounter."

Elscol licked dry lips. "Vong or Alliance?"

"Neither, actually. They encountered three ships of unknown design performing repair work in low orbit over a gas giant."

"Are they still there?" she asked.

Lecersen nodded. "We're scrambling one assault shuttle now. You're welcome to bring one of yours along."

Elscol tried very hard not to glance at Boba Fett. "Do you want some of your people onboard?"

"If you do mixed teams, so will we."

"Okay," Elscol said. She knew Aref'ja wouldn't get here for another few minutes and they had to act fast. They needed to act smart too. "The top priority is *capture*, not destruction."

"Of course," Lecersen nodded. "These ships don't match any registry in our database, so we assume they're native to the Unknown Regions. Anything we can glean from them would be appreciated."

"Good. Transmit the coordinates and give us ten minutes to launch."

"Sending them now. Good hunting, Captain."

Elscol nodded and switched off the connection. She finally allowed herself to turn around and look into the mirror-black T-visor of Boba Fett's helmet.

"Get your people," she said. "Main hangar. Eight minutes."

"Copy," Fett said over his helmet speaker. He turned for the exit and the other Mandalorian followed him out. Elscol watched the door slide shut behind them and wondered if that was the only word she'd ever heard him say.

The Alliance assault shuttle was no *tra'kad*, but in terms of armor, armament, and carrying capacity, it was about on par with a *Gamma*-class shuttle on *Chimaera*. It would do.

The interior of the shuttle was one large chamber, and from his spot in the aft section, secured to the wall with crash webbing next to Bess Skirata, with Jaller and Dinua on the opposite wall, Boba Fett could see out the forward cockpit viewport. The Alliance crewmen pulled their levers and hit their buttons and catapulted the ship to hyperspace. Fett knew it would be a short ride, and after just thirty seconds of flashing blue light the stars appeared again.

First he saw the red flares of the Imperial shuttle's engines. Then the stars panned upward and the swirling red gases of a massive planet filled the viewport. Both shuttles plunged forward into the planet's gravity well, and Fett used his helmet scanners to enhance his view. It took him a moment, but he spotted three small craft, two shuttle-sized and one corvette-sized, hanging in low orbit. There appeared to be something floating around the hull of the corvette; maybe debris, or maybe some EV repair crew or droids.

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"Broadcasting surrender request now," the pilot announced for his passengers: four Mandos and four Alliance commandos. Unlike Fett's people, they didn't have black visors obscuring their faces. Their emotions were naked on their faces: anxiety, determination, fear, anger. Just like soldiers all over the galaxy. Fett didn't know if Bess and Jaller were paying attention, or if that realization would break some of their Mando haughtiness. He hoped so, but he doubted it. Mandos were stubborn as a rule, and none more than the Skirata clan.

Outside, there was some activity in those black flecks outside their hulls. As they recalled their repair crew their thrust engines flared back to life.

"They're firing engines," the pilot announced, as if they couldn't see.

"Ion cannon ready," the copilot said. "Firing."

The assault shuttle shook just a little as a pair of blue ion bolts sizzled out from the cannons beneath the cockpit. Ion canons were slow-fire weapons, and after a long half-second they fired another pair of shots. The Imperial shuttle raced ahead and fired its own volley. The shots connected with the corvette and blue energy arced across its surface. The smaller shuttle tried to turn around and bring their guns to bear. One took an ion volley in the face, crackled with blue lighting, and started to drift. The other fired off a reckless round of red plasma bolts that missed the shuttles by a wide margin. Then it, too, took a series of ion blasts and started drifting.

"Okay people," the pilot announced, "We're going for the corvette analog. Looks like... aft-port and aft-starboard airlocks. We're going to get you in at the port side. The other shuttle's going in starboard. Try not to shoot each other."

Fett couldn't tell if he was trying to be funny. Neither could the Alliance commandos, apparently, since none of them responded. All eight soldiers unbuckled their crash webbing and started checking their gear one last time.

"Any idea what we're up against, *Mand'alor*?" Dinua's voice crackled in his headset.

"Not a clue," Fett told them. "Be ready for anything."

"We're always ready," Bess boasted as she checked her rifle.

"For your own sakes you'd better be," Fett warned. He glanced out the viewport. The shuttle was turning itself so that its main side airlock could couple with the corvette. The flank of the alien vessel grew ever closer, while the red whorls of the gas giant loomed beyond.

There was a brief, loud screech of metal as they sidled next to the airlock. Fett checked the pressure on his combat suit as the Alliance commandos pulled down the airtight visors on their own helmets. Those visors turned their faces into black mirrors, and that somehow made Fett feel better about the people he'd be fighting with.

"Ready to open the airlock," the pilot announced as he secured his own helmet. "Charges standing by. One, two three. *Mark!*"

The direction charges on the assault shuttle's hull were designed for breaking the vacuum seal on other ships' airlocks. In this case they did their job beautifully. First there was a sound like a big tin can popping, and then the assault shuttle's airlock swung open. Fett charged in first, Mandos behind him, Alliance commandos behind them. They burst into a corridor, dark and narrow. Fett switched his helmet viewfinder to infrared while the commandos flicked on the direction headlights attached to the barrel of their Verpine assault rifles.

They charged down the corridor, weapons ready. When they reached the doorway at the end Fett and Jaller attached micro-charges to the edges of door, stood back, and set them off. Sparks burst out and nothing moved, but one quick check at his equipment told Fett it was enough to demagnetize the door. All it took was one hard push to get it open.

They stepped into a larger area, possibly a cargo hold. The commandos spread out, their white light-beams crisscrossing in the gloom. Fett's infrared picked up nothing, so he switched back to visual.

"Check your air readings," Bess said, over her helmet's speaker instead of the headset. She wanted the Alliance commandos to hear too.

"Copy that," the commando leader said. "Looks like... di-hydrogen sulfate."

"Weird beings we're looking at," Jaller said, also over his headset.

Two of the commando's spotlights were angled upward toward the ceiling. A third joined them, then the fourth. Fett arced his head back to see a huge metal grid overhead. A dozen or so devices hung on their racks. They seemed to be as cold and inert as the rest of the ship. They were disc-shaped, maybe a meter in diameter, with what looked like sensor antennae on the dorsal and ventral points.

"Some kind of drones?" Jaller suggested.

One of the commandos started, "I don't like this..."

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There was a clanking sound, perfectly timed. The drones jerked free of their rack and fell at repulsor-retarded speed toward the floor.

"Oh *fierfek*," Fett swore, and scrambled for cover.

Small, dart-like laser-blasts laced the cargo hold. Fett threw himself behind one cargo crate and stared firing his rifle at the drones as they wheeled chaotically around the dark open space. He saw a fountain of sparks as one commando took a hit to the chest and tumbled to the ground. He tried to spot the other Mandos and saw someone in dark armor- Bess or Jaller- shoot down a drone before running for cover.

The little machines swirled around so fast there was no point in aiming. The others seemed to have gathered that too, and everyone was firing an upward rain of plasma toward the ceiling. Sparks flew as parts of grid burned and twisted under constant laser fire. Still, fast and nimble though they were, the drones weren't tough; Fett winged one, sending it on a spiral into the wall where it burst into flames. One of the commandos hit another dead-on and it geysered fire in the air. The chamber filled with smoke, sparks, and debris. It would get messy in here pretty soon.

They were just starting to thin out the drones when someone started firing on the opposite hallway. Fett heard a cry of pain on his headset and Bess announced, "Jaller is down! Repeat, he is *down!*" but Fett didn't see any of it. Crouched behind a crate, he switched his infrared back on. That blinded him to the cold drones in the air but he could see slim red figures in the hallway entrance, firing some kind of long-bodied blaster rifles into the bay.

"I'm on them" Fett said. Still crouching, he side-stepped out from behind the crates, made the tiniest jump, and fired his jet pack.

A short burst of fire was all it took to send him rocketing across the hold, right into the alien attackers. They barely had time to register his approach before he careened into them head-on. He slammed into one and knocked it back, and bounced another against the wall, but their slim bodies were surprisingly hard and resilient.

He heard strange barking noises coming from the aliens as he landed on all fours. He spun around as fast as he could, and before the aliens could bring their long rifles to bear, he raised one arm and fired a stream of raw plasma right into their faces.

The barks turned to tortured howls. The aliens ran into the hold, trailing fire from their thin, flat bodies. Fett watched them flail and collapse with decided satisfaction, muted by the sharp aching in his shoulders and right arm.

He was getting too *shabla* old for this.

Another figure raced across the hold, head down, avoiding the sporadic blasts from the few remaining drones. Fett still had his infra-red on, but from the Mando's familiar body language he could tell it was Dinua.

"Good job, *Mand'alor*," she said as she met him in the hallway. Unlike the others, he could tell there was no suspicion or mocking when Beviin's adopted daughter said his title.

"I'm getting too old for this *osik*," he said.

"Fore of the ship is this way," Dinua waved the hallway ahead.

"Where's Jaller?" he asked. If anything happened to their nephew the old Nulls would literally kill him.

"Shot in the leg. Bess is doing first aid now," Dinua said. "Come on. No time to waste. The rest'll catch up. *Hukaat'kama*."

She bent low, rifle cradled in both arms, and charged down the hall. Fett suppressed a sigh, bent low, and ran after her. His neck and shoulders still hurt and he couldn't help envy the young.

When he caught up with Dinua she had already blown another door and advanced into the next room. This one was smaller, with no signs of life. A staging area, maybe. They pressed forward through that room, then another, and when they blew open the next door they were greeted with a hail of blaster fire. They pressed themselves against opposite walls as laser blasts poured through the doorway.

"Any bright ideas?" Fett asked over his helmet comm.

"Just one," Dinua said, and she unbuckled something small from her belt. "Flash-bang," she added. "You on infrared?"

"Yes. Do it now."

Dinua leaned off the wall just enough to toss the grenade in the hole. There was a burst of intense light, but with the IR setting on his helmet Fett didn't see it. He did see the energy bolts stop firing, so he pushed off the wall and charged through the doorway, Dinua right behind him. Dinua shot indiscriminately while Fett fired up his flamethrower and sent a crimson arc jetting out around him. Dinua dropped three aliens while Fett torched two

more. The flaming ones made more horrible noises as they writhed, collapsed, and finally died.

It took them long enough.

"Check your visual," Dinua said. "I think we're near the cockpit."

Fett switched IR off to see a room littered with strange ribbon-like corpses and illuminated by blue overhead lights. Dinua was examining the door-access panel on one wall.

"What?" Fett asked. "Can you tell what it says?"

"No, but based on the exterior of the ship, we should be close."

Suddenly the room's third door slid open. Fett and Dinua turned around as one, rifles ready, only to see a broad-shouldered figure in dark-violet armor.

"Son of a *chakaar*," Baltan Carid's voice sounded in his helmet. "Looks like you got here first."

"Face it, we're just better." Dinua bragged.

"Jeban, get on that cockpit door" Fett said. He didn't care about banter. "Carid, report."

Carid stepped into the room and a pair of Alliance commandos fanned out from behind him. The big Mando paid them little attention and said, "Had a little trouble with those ribbon things. Two *aruetiise* down, one dead. *Bard'ika*'s working on the other one now."

Fett modified the channel on his headset and called the Skiratas. "Jaller? Bess? Report."

"Three commandos are heading your way. Fourt one is dead." Bess said. "Is the ship secure?"

"We've got the cockpit. Jeban's working on-" he heard the hiss of a door and saw three figures rush into the newly-revealed hall. "They're inside. How's Jaller?"

"Bleeding's stopped but he's not going to walk any time soon."

"He might. Carid's here with the Imp team. He brought the old Jedi along. Maybe he can pull a magic trick."

"It's not *magic*," Jaller's voice rasped over the comlink. He sounded strained, but energetic enough to be angry. "That old man saved my *buir*'s life before I was born. I wouldn't *be* here if it weren't for him."

"Fine, whatever, I'll send him your way," Fett switched back to his former frequency and asked Carid, "You hear all that?"

"Yeah, I heard," the big man nodded. "I'll tell *Bard'ika* to find him."

As Carid made his call, Fett heard Dinua's voice from down the hall. She was calling aloud, "*Mand'alor*, get in here. You're going to want to see this."

Curious but unhurried, Fett walked down the passage-way into the cockpit. It was surprisingly small for a ship its size, with room for only four crewmen. Dinua was in one seat while the Alliance commandos tried to figure out the adjacent consoles. They were unlike any design Fett was familiar with, having been clearly designed for alien hands.

Fett switched his external speakers on. Apparently Dinua wanted the Alliance people to hear too.

"What have you got?" he asked.

"Still trying to figure out these systems," Dinua said, "But I *think* this is data about the crab boys, and not local knowledge."

Fett peered over her shoulder at the console's flat screen. Sure enough, he saw diagrams of Yuuzhan Vong vessels and text in the familiar angular letters of Aurbesh.

"Must have met our Alliance buddies," Fett surmised.

"I think we have nav data too," one of the commandos announced.

"Readouts from their ship's sensor logs," said another. "Looks like we've got a good survey of the ships in the Alliance fleet. Stang, if we've got their nav data we might retrace their path, even find where those Alliance ships are now."

Dinua whistled. "I have a feeling someone's going to be happy with us."

Without Miranda to visit for hour-long lunchtime chats, Myri resigned herself to a future of vague, timeless nothing. Logically speaking, Miranda leaving meant simply meant that she would have less conversation with her scheduled meals. In emotional terms, it meant she'd just had her last connection with the outside world severed. She was left to pace her room and sleep and consternate in total isolation from the galaxy as a whole. More specifically, she had no way of knowing what was going on in the fleet, no way of knowing what strange results were being born by the alliance between Aref'ja's Alliance renegades and Admiral Daala's. Whatever they'd be, Myri didn't anticipate anything good.

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When lunchtime came the following day, she was therefore surprised when it was brought by none other than Captain Elscol Loro.

The woman stepped inside Myri's room holding a tray in both hands. The door closed shut behind her and Myri sat on her bed, looking up at the stern old woman, not knowing quite what to say.

Elscol walked up to her and thrust the tray out. Myri took it without a word, placed it on her lap, and kept looking up at Elscol.

"Thank you," Myri said eventually.

Elscol nodded and clasped her hands behind her back. She asked, "Are you aware of the current state of this fleet?"

"I heard a little from Miranda. I heard you're allied with Admiral Daala now, and they you have Boba Fett on board."

"That was yesterday," Elscol said. "Have you heard anything else?"

"It's been a boring morning for me," Myri said. "Not for you, I'm guessing."

Elscol seemed to consider something, then reached inside the pocket of her uniform. When her hand came out it was empty. "The bugs in your room have been temporarily disabled," she said

"Okay." Myri had been a little hungry before but now she was curious, and a little wary. "What happened?"

"There have been developments. The Imperials have found the location of your friends' fleet."

Myri stiffened in dread. "What do you plan to do about it?"

"We have a stealth ship monitoring their communications and ship movements now," Elscol said.

"Do you plan to attack?"

"Admiral Aref'ja made it clear at the start of this mission that he would not fire upon Alliance ships unless fired upon first."

"Okay. Is *Daala* going to attack?"

"We can't be held responsible for everything Daala does. A pitched fight between our fleets would serve neither interest, not when the Vong are still out there." Elscol seemed to be talking half to herself.

"You're right," Myri said. "What about Aref'ja? Doesn't he agree?"

"He doesn't control Daala. No one does."

"Is she going to attack?" Myri pressed.

She tried to think of all the people she knew who could be in that fleet. Odds were good the Wraiths were on that mission, and her cousin Jagged too. She had no idea how many ships they had, or for that matter how many ships Aref'ja and Daala had, but it was terrifying to think that her ship could kill them, or their ships could kill her, and none of them would ever know.

Dimly, she felt glad that Syal was far away and safe.

"Admiral Daala wishes to perform a surgical strike," Elscol said, "One that will cripple the fleet without causing too much damage to either fleet."

"What does that *mean*, though?"

"It means that Daala intends to cripple your forces with as little casualties on either side as possible. Aref'ja wouldn't have agreed to help her otherwise."

Myri swallowed. "So this ship is going to be jumping into the fight?"

"It may."

"And I'm going to be trapped here in this kriffing room while my friends fight and die?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Myri gnzshed her teeth. "Why are you telling me this? Why are you making me sit here and suffer over something I can't change?"

"If you're anything like your parents, you can't stand not knowing," Elscol said.

Myri wanted to say she should never have come, that she'd rather live and die in ignorance, but it wasn't true.

"Don't expect me to thank you." She said bitterly.

"I don't deserve thanks," Elscol said.

Through her anger Myri felt a dim compassion for a woman thrown out of her depth. Then she remembered that this woman had set out to exterminate an entire species of sentient beings. She tried to keep the spite out of her voice and asked, "Is there anything you can do? Anything to stop them? Anything to-"

She choked on her words. She couldn't do anything to save her friends, and she knew this woman could not either.

"I'm sorry," Elscol said finally. "I can't do anything for anyone now."

Myri looked at her and she looked at Myri. Her green eyes were sunken and sad and her face seemed carved by violence and loss.

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Elscol reached into her uniform, and a moment later withdrew her hand. The bugs were back on. Her voice strong again, the captain said, "If any major problems arise, please let your guards know. They will continue to be on watch."

Myri nodded a little. Elscol turned and walked out of the room. The door slid shut behind her, leaving Myri alone on her bed with a tray of cooling food in her lap. She wasn't the least bit hungry anymore. She put the tray on her bed, leaned forward, and got to her feet. She felt anxious and angry and full of pent-up energy. She felt like punching the wall or kicking the door but she knew it wouldn't do any good.

She was trapped, and if this ship went down, she knew there'd be no one there to save her.

Chapter 11

They sat in their quarters, side by side on the edge of the bed, trying to think of something to say to each other.

Jagged held the data chip containing the top-secret lab report in his hands. He pressed it between his palms. There was no doubt about it: Alpha Red.

Jaina could feel a swirl of emotions inside her husband, none of them betrayed by his blank exterior. Beneath that cold facade, built into him during his childhood with the Chiss, he was a mess of conflicted loyalties, conflicted loves. But because he was Jagged, he tried to hide it all, even from his Jedi wife.

After a long time sitting in silence, he said, "We should call my sister. Arrange a meeting."

"What will you say?" Jaina asked softly.

"I'll tell her the truth. There's a good chance she already suspects, considering the job you did on her laboratory."

Jaina didn't take it as an accusation. They'd done what they could to obtain results. They'd left *Celestial* shortly thereafter, without any request for delay by the ship's commander. Jaina hadn't been surprised. The Chiss had no proof that Jaina and the Wraiths had broken into their lab, only a

burst air conduit and minor decompression. They might suspect, but had no evidence to hold them, and any attempt would open their secret lab to scrutiny.

Now Jagged was getting ready to blow it all wide open, and that meant a confrontation with the sister he no longer knew. Jaina knew full well what it meant to watch someone you loved and grew up with transform into something dangerous. She wouldn't say it to Jag now, lest she seem to demean his pain, but Wynssa had nothing on Jacen. Most likely she was following orders from Chiss high command like any good soldier. It would be unfair to make her a villain just for having Alpha Red aboard her ship, but very soon she could become one, depending on how her conversation with Jagged went.

"I want you with me," Jag said.

"When you meet with her?"

"And when I make the call," he said.

"I don't know if that's a good idea. We didn't exactly start off on the right foot. Or end on the right one either."

"We're doing this *together*," Jag insisted. "And we're not keeping the Imperials in the dark either. We'll invite Fy'lyor to the conference as well. In fact, we should probably hold it on her ship. It would seem more neutral than *Celestial* or *Starless*."

"That makes sense," Jaina said.

She didn't savor the idea of sitting down with Fy'lyor either, but the Imperial had shown pragmatism during the meeting with the Tylonians and she might be a helpful counterpoint now. Or she might throw her weight behind Wynssa; Jaina had a hard time reading the Twi'lek woman, even with the Force.

"What about Ben?" she asked. "Should we recall him from *Celestial*?"

Jag shook his head. "No. That would tip our hand too much. It would make it look like we're ready to go to war with them if they don't give up Alpha Red."

"Are we?" Jaina asked.

Jag stared into the wall. "It's possible."

"Okay," Jaina breathed. "What should we tell Captain Antilles?"

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"She has as much right to know about Alpha Red as Fy'ylor, so I'll brief her in private, but I want her on *Starless* to keep the ship at readiness, without going on alert. I want to settle this quietly, if possible."

"Sounds good to me," Jaina said, though she could not see Wynssa backing down and simply handing the bioweapon over to Jag or allowing it to be destroyed.

"Also," he said, "I want you to go to *Justifier* ahead of me, on a separate ship."

Jaina frowned. "Why?"

"Because if we arrive together, it might send certain signals. I want Wynssa and Fy'ylor to view us as separate entities."

"You want to remain professionally detached?" Jaina raised an eyebrow. "That's not something a wife wants to hear."

"That's not what I meant." Jag ran a hand through his hair, not calmed by her joke. "You have your obligations and I have mine and I do not want to give the idea that we're in total lock-step for the negotiations. Do you see what I'm getting it?"

"I do. I get it. It's a smart professional choice." Jaina smiled wanly, then sighed. "So I guess I should pack my stuff and head over to Red's place right away?"

"That's the short of it." Jag rose to his feet and straightened his red-striped uniform. He looked down at Jaina and said, "Well, I suppose we'd better give her a call."

"Now?" Jaina asked, surprised.

"Let's get it over with," Jagged said, and went over to their quarters' private communications console. Jaina got off the bed, gave herself a look-over in the mirror, and walked up next to Jag.

"Bridge, this is Commander Fel," he was saying to the miniature blue torso of a communications officer. "Please get me and an encrypted connection with Commodore Fel on *Celestial*. Route it through my quarters."

"Copy, sir. Please stand by."

The officer's image disappeared. Jag looked at Jaina and tried to force a smile. He was never very good at that, and she gave his shoulders one squeeze. Then she dropped her hand, clasped it behind her back, and waited for Wynssa's image to appear.

It took less than a minute. Jagged's sister appeared on the holo, twice the size of the comm officer. She wore her blond hair pulled back and had the same cool expression she usually did.

"Hello, Commander," she said evenly. Even if Jaina hadn't been standing there, she doubted Wynssa would call her brother by name. Not when they both knew something was up.

"Thank you for speaking on short notice," Jagged said. Apparently he wasn't going to be using proper names either. Jaina supposed if he did, it would make this conversation all the more painful. "I am requesting an in-person meeting with you aboard *Justifier*, Commodore. Master Solo and Captain Fy'lyor will also attend."

Wynssa arched an eyebrow. "May I know in advance what this is about?"

"I prefer to speak to that in person," Jag said. "This is an issue of absolute top security."

"I understand your need for secrecy," Wynssa's gaze shifted to Jaina. "I see Master Solo is still with you. Will she be transferring to *Justifier* after the meeting?"

"That's the plan," Jaina said. "How's Ben?"

"Mr. Skywalker is adjusting well."

"So everything is operating smoothly on *Celestia*?"

"Mostly," Wynssa said. "Shortly after Mr. Skywalker arrived, and shortly *before* you left, we had a minor incident with one of our hallways losing oxygen. Our security systems were having issues at the time, but it looks to have been a simple accident."

"Glad to hear it," Jaina said.

Wynssa shifted her eyes back to her brother. "Minor though this incident was, I would be happy to discuss the details at our meeting, if you'd like."

"I think we can find time to talk about it," Jagged said.

"Very well," Wynssa nodded. "When will this meeting be held?"

"Can you be available in two hours?"

"I can," she nodded again. "I will see you soon, Commander."

With that, the hologram flickered off. Jagged released a long, pent-up breath and looked to Jaina. She reached out and squeezed his hand.

"We're committed," he said, and squeezed back.

Fy'lyor hated nothing more than being left in the dark, and right now the situation was pitch black. All she knew was that, less than two hours ago, Jagged Fel had commed her from *Starless* and ordered her to prepare to receive himself, Jaina Solo, and Wynssa Fel for a top-level, high-security meeting aboard *Justifier*. He refused to say what it was about. He also insisted on having no honor guard greet him, as he wanted the entire meeting to remain as confidential as possible.

She'd spent most of the two hours since his call getting security arrangements in order. During brief moments of calm, her mind kept going back to the fact that the conference was being held on *her* ship. There could be any number of reasons why, but the possibility that seemed most likely was that there was some tension between Fel and his sister, or between the Alliance and the Chiss, and *Justifier* was going to act as neutral ground. That meant Fy'lyor might end up in an arbitrator's position, and it was incredibly frustrating to know nothing about the conflict she might have to resolve.

In her rush to prepare, she almost forgot that Jaina Solo was coming early. She was, in fact, overseeing the security team's sweep of the conference room when deck control called her to report that Solo's shuttle had arrived.

It required a lot of effort on Fy'lyor's part not to let her displeasure show. As far as partners/spies went, Ben Skywalker had been manageable. Having a Force-user around was unnerving, but the boy had generally been unobtrusive, and when he'd requested to talk with Fy'lyor he'd made thoughtful, well-meaning suggestions.

She did not expect the same grace from Fel's wife.

Fy'lyor considered just having Solo march up to the conference room where she wouldn't have to be dealt with, but Solo was also supposed to be a long-term guest, which meant the captain had to at least try and start things off on a friendly foot.

So she rose the turbolift down to the secondary hangar, where Solo's *Lambda*-class shuttle was resting. As per request, she received no honor guard and had only a pair of stormtroopers flanking her. She had a satchel slung over his shoulder and a lightsaber dangling from her belt and her arms were crossed over his chest. As Fy'lyor got closer she saw by her face that she was more distracted than impatient.

"Thank you for coming, Master Solo," Fy'lyor said. She extended a red hand that Solo shook.

The Jedi gave the hangar a short glance-over and said, "Thanks for having me, Captain. Any place I can put my things?"

"The guards will escort you to your quarters. After that, they'll take you right to the conference room."

"Thanks," Solo forced a smile. "Commander Fel should be along in a half hour or so."

"I understand. I'm sure you'll be ready by then," Fy'lyor said.

She waved a hand forward and Solo went off with her escorts. It seemed like a waste of a shuttle trip to have Fel and his wife arrive separately, but apparently the man wanted to keep up some appearances of impartiality, even when his actions loudly spoke otherwise. It was, for better or worse, one of his key command traits.

Fy'lyor did her best to put Solo out of her mind for the next half-hour. She went back to the conference room and ran last checks. Then she went up to the bridge to give final consultations with security and communications, and to brief her first officer before she went incommunicado for however long Fel's mysterious meeting would last. It all took just about thirty minutes, and just as she finished with her briefing, the tactical station reported that a shuttle had just left *Starless* and was on an approach vector.

Per Fel's orders, the shuttle was reporting only its name and security code, making no mention of who was on board. In a minute or two, another shuttle would depart from the Chiss vessel and do the same. Fy'lyor's security team would make sure both Fel siblings got to the conference room via secured routes, and that they would not be spotted by anyone other than a handful of escorts and deck crew with security clearance. Even the normal security cams would be turned off.

Fy'lyor paused for a moment at the forward viewport to watch the shuttle's pale form cut across space. They had moved away from the debris field, but chunks of warped yorik coral and demolished Tylonian vessels sometimes blinked in front of clusters of stars. The shuttle moved slowly, so as to avoid any lingering wreckage that might have floated free of the main battle site.

Suddenly the tactical officer called, "Captain! Three ships just let hyperspace!"

Fy'lyor turned to him. "Where?"

"Captain, they're—"

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She saw a flash out of the corner of her eye and whirled back to the viewport. A trio of corvettes, *Marauder*-class, sliced across *Justifier*'s bow toward Fel's shuttle.

"Raise shields!" Fy'lyor shouted. "Target those-"

Before she could say any more the Marauders swept past Fel's shuttle without firing a shot. She felt a second of relief, then greater panic as she saw the shuttle being dragged along with the Marauders.

"They've got it in a tractor beam!" tactical reported. "No, that's three tractor-"

"More ships!" another officer said. "Three, four, no, six-"

"It's coming in fast!"

She saw it a second before it hit: a Tylonian corvette, maybe *the* corvette they'd captured before, streaking in from above, barely even decelerating as it left hyperspace. It slammed into *Justifier*'s shields and through them, then tore into the destroyer's super-structure. The bridge itself buckled, throwing Fy'lyor to the deck. Alarm bells screamed. Crewmen shouted reported of massive decompression and extensive hull damage. Communication was down for everything nose-ward from the main hangar. Engines were failing. All shields were down.

Fy'lyor staggered to her feet. She lurched toward the tactical station, where officers were frantically trying to make sense of their flickering viewscreens and sparking consoles.

"Where's the shuttle?" she shouted at them. "What happened to it?"

"The Marauders still have it, sir!" one of the lieutenants said. She was bleeding from the forehead and had one bloody hand pressed against her hairline. "They're taking it to the star destroyer!"

Fy'lyor looked back at the viewport. All she could see was *Justifier*'s entrails- fire, equipment, ships, people- spilling out into space. "What star destroyer?"

Another lieutenant, a tall young Muun, said, "Captain... It's a *Nebula*-class, not ours."

"There's more ships too," the first lieutenant said, even as Fy'lyor tried to grapple with the revelation. "Two Bothan Assault Cruisers and... ID says *Chimaera*."

The deck buckled again. Fy'lyor barely managed to stay upright but the Muun was thrown forward. His pale, long face smacked into the corner of his console and started to bleed.

From elsewhere on the bridge, someone shouted, "Captain, we're being boarded! Multiple entry points!"

Fy'lyor tried to move across the bridge to the security station but was thrown by another explosion that rocked the ship. She fell on her side, crushing one lekku with her shoulder. She tried to force away the pain and get back to her feet. She heard blasterfire and saw the flash of some explosions by the entrance to the bridge. Her security team tried to return fire but she saw her chief drop, then another, and another.

She rose to her feet in the middle of her smoking, chaos-filled bridge to face a hulking Mandalorian in dark violet armor.

She wanted to say something defiant, but before she could get a word out, the Mandalorian raised his rifle and fire one blue energy blast into her chest. She fell back, and dimly felt the pain of impact as her head smacked into the hard deck. A stun bolt, she thought, as her body grew numb. A stun bolt.

That was worse. She would rather die than live with this failure.

Jaina was still in her quarters when everything went to hell. She on her knees, searching under her bed for the inevitable eavesdropping devices, and her paranoia ended up saving her life when the whole room shook, the lights flickered off, and a massive durasteel beam stabbed through the walls at chest-level like an oversized vibro-blade.

Jaina felt a burst of panic and pain through the Force. She fumbled for her lightsaber and turned it on, casting dim blue light over the sudden wreckage of her room. She crawled for the door, found it wouldn't open, and cut a clean opening with her saber.

There were emergency red lights in the halls and people were running, all in the same direction. Jaina grabbed a pilot, young and smooth faced, already in his black flight suit, and asked, "What happened? What's going on?"

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His panicked eyes took in her glowing saber and scowling face. He stuttered, "I-I-I don't know! There w-w-was an explosion! The whole front part of the ship is down!"

"Are we under attack? Who is it?"

"I don't know!" the pilot protested. "Please, we have to get out of here! Decks are losing atmo one by one!"

She pointed in the direction everyone was running. "Are they going to the hangar?"

The pilot wagged his head back and forth. "Main hangar's down! There's emergency-"

Blasterfire filled the corridor before he could finish his sentence. Jaina swore, pushed him behind her, and raised her lightsaber to deflect bolts. Some Imperials were dropping to their knees to fire with sidearms while others pressed themselves against the walls, unarmed and helpless, while their assailants, whoever they were, kept pouring streams of red blasterfire down the corridor.

In the narrow, empty corridor, these Imperials had no cover, which meant somebody had to cover them. Jaina stepped forward toward the source of blasterfire. She did her best to reflect the blasts harmlessly into the wall. A few Imperials followed behind her as she advanced, using her swirling saber for cover as they fired shots at their opponents. As she got closer, Jaina could make out the dark gleam of helmet visors and flashes of white stormtrooper armor.

The Imperials following her didn't seem to have qualms about firing on their own, not when they'd been shot at first. Jaina was so busy deflecting laser blasts that she barely noticed something small arc over her shoulder and roll down the hallway toward the enemy stormtroopers.

"Get down!" someone said. A white-armored hand grabbed her by the waist and threw her to the floor. The corridor shook with the detonation of a grenade, and before Jaina could get to her feet again friendly troopers were jumping overhead, charging ahead into the cloud of smoke and debris. A stormtrooper (the same one who threw her down or another, she couldn't tell) grabbed her by the shoulder and helped pull her up.

"Thanks for the cover, Miss," the stormtrooper said. He tapped one black glove against his white helmet in salute, then charged into the fray.

Jaina made a mental note to compliment Fy'lyor on her crew, if either of them survived this. She reignited her lightsaber and charged in after them. The smoke was already clearing and the last of the attacking storm-troopers were in retreat. The defending soldiers, apparently tired of shooting their own, let them go.

Jaina shut down her lightsaber and took a look at her surroundings. They were in a hallway junction, with four branches jutting off at right angles. Based on what the pilot had said, the front of the ship was at her back, and the enemy was fleeing back toward the port side of the ship.

"Escape pods are that way," One of the stormtroopers pointed down the starboard hallway. Technicians, pilots, and officers were already scampering in that direction.

"Did you get an evac order?" Jaina grabbed the trooper by the shoulder.

"Negative." He shook his head. "Communications with the bridge and conning tower are down. We think they've been compromised."

Jaina had no idea how someone- presumably Daala's fleet- had managed to cripple *Justifier* so quickly. She had no idea what else was going on outside the dying ship. She had no idea where Jag was, or Ben or Tahiri or the Wraiths. They were too far away to feel through the Force, especially in the chaos of battle.

More and more crewmen were heading for the escape pods, but a half-dozen stormtroopers remained at the junction, probably intending to hold it against the next attack.

The stormtrooper next to her said, "Miss, you should head for the escape pod."

Jaina shook her head and ignited her lightsaber. "Not yet. You'll need cover."

The trooper nodded wordless thanks. There wasn't really anything to say.

The next attack came soon after. More fire came from the portside corridor, effectively cutting off the crew trying to escape to the starboard side. Jaina placed herself in the middle of the junction, intercepting laser blasts while her stormtroopers did their best to return fire.

She was caught off-guard by another hail of laserfire. Two of the stormtroopers fighter with her went down while she tried to find cover. They were coming down the aft hallway too, only this time, instead of the

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white gleam of stormtrooper armor, Jaina spotted battle-scarred, multi-colored helmets with black T-shaped visors.

She didn't even have time to swear before a grenade landed in the middle of the junction. She threw up a wall of Force energy to protect herself and the two storm-troopers next to her, but instead of a massive concussion blast she was met with a burst of blinding white.

Her vision turned to blank nothing and a high endless whining filled her ears. She tried to reach out the Force and feel the people around her but everything was still a maelstrom of panic and terror. She saw flickers of motion emerge from the white: red streaks of laserfire, the dark shapes of visors, and swinging of legs. She heard the sharp pang of blasterfire and the pounding of feet but no voices. She heard a familiar clink of metal on metal as her lightsaber skittered across the floor.

Jaina reached out with the Force and called it to her hand, barely able to see but still knowing where to catch it. Her lightsaber flew out of the white, right toward her outstretched fingers-

-and froze, just beyond her reach.

She kept on trying to tug it forward with the Force as the smoke, blaster-scored, corpse-littered junction finally resolved itself out of the white. She saw, beyond her lightsaber, a Mandalorian standing with his hand similarly outstretching. His gray and red armor was old and battered by a hundred battles. He had a lightsaber hanging off his own belt, a lightsaber that had flared to life and battled hers one gorgeous Mandalorian sunset as they rehearsed her horrible and necessary passage through flame.

In her moment of shock, her control slipped, and her lightsaber went flying into Gotab's hand.

"You," she croaked.

Gotab nodded. Then a blast took her from behind and she dropped to the floor. She tried to fight the growing numbness and rolled onto her back. She stared upward at the bright ceiling and saw Gotab's red helmet staring down at her. Then, next to his, appeared the miss-matched, multicolored armor of the one called Venku. She felt something from them in the Force. She thought it was pity.

Everything happened so fast. Syal was on the bridge of *Starless*, ready to oversee Fel's departure on this mission of his, when three Marauder Corvettes appeared out of nowhere, snagged Fel's shuttle in mid-flight like an expert swing-ball catcher and hurled it right into a second *Nebula*-class star destroyer that appeared off *Justifier's* port side with impeccable precision. Then a Tylonian vessel reverted to realspace and stabbed through the heart of *Justifier* like a spear, and then everything *really* fell apart.

The fleet had fighter squadrons on emergency standby at all times, but it still took several minutes for *Starless*, *Corusca Gem*, and *Liberty Star* to begin launching fighters. Even when formations of X-wings and E-wings darted out into space, it was unclear what to *do* with them. The other *Nebula*-class, whose ID broadcasted itself as *Phoenix*, was already pulling away after receiving Fel's shuttle. *Justifier's* carcass smoldered and began to drift through space. Escape pods were shooting out of its hull faster than *Gem's* rescue shuttles could catch them.

There were reports of assault shuttles attaching them-selves onto the dead star destroyer, and boarding parties were presumably bursting through its halls. The broad gray wedge of *Chimaera* sat flanked, improbably, by two Bothan Assault Cruisers identifying as *Koth Melan* and *Fey'lya's Revenge*. The three vessels seemed to hover over *Justifier* like vultures while their boarding parties ravaged its corpse. The shuttles and starfighters flitting around their hulls were like hungry insects.

Syal did her best to issue orders. She told the shuttle crews to pick up as many escape pods as possible. The E-wings and X-wings were to provide cover in case the attackers decided to launch fighters. She ordered *Cerulean* and *Viridian*, the two Corellian gunships, to give chase to *Phoenix* as it fled, while she ordered Captain Omphlem to fire up *Mon Dromeda's* gravity well generators.

They came up just after *Phoenix* jumped to hyperspace, taking the three Marauders and Jagged Fel with it.

Kre'fey arrived on-scene thirty seconds later, just as the gravity wells had trapped the three remaining capital ships with the Trinity fleet. The blond Jedi, Tahiri Veila, was right on his heels.

The white-furred Bothan went straight up to Syal at the forward command station. His violet eyes took in the tactical holo before switching to the scene outside the forward viewport. From its position, *Starless* had a

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fine view of *Justifier* drifting through space, and the three enemy ships hovering ominously behind it.

"They've got Fel," Syal told him right away. The words were bitter in her mouth, an admission of yet another horrible failure.

"You've trapped them in a grav well," Tahiri said.

"Yes," Syal hissed, angry she was wasting words on the obvious. "They've got boarding parties on *Justifier*. We can keep them here, trap them. Three ships can't stand against ours."

"They're sure to have more," Kre'fey's white fur bristled. "If we try to snare them they'll just call in reinforcements."

"Captain!" came a call from the communications section. "We're getting a line from Captain Vernedet on *Vindicator*. He's requesting orders."

With *Justifier* down and Fy'lyor dead or captured, Vernedet was the highest-ranking Imperial officer in Trinity. He was an old human, veteran of the last Vong War according to his files, and while he seemed professional Syal had no idea how he'd respond to an order to fire on *Chimaera*.

By the same token, she didn't know if her own crews would be willing to fire on the Bothan cruisers.

"Tell him to move in on *Fey'lya's* flank but to *not* engage," Syal called. "And call *Liberty Star*. Tell Captain Tharen to move in on *Melan*."

"Captain," reported Tactical, "Those assault shuttles are detaching from *Justifier*. They're heading back to *Chimaera*."

"They're going to try and run," Syal looked to Kre'fey. "They can't. We've trapped them. They can't even attack *Mon Dromeda* without getting past Vernedet and Tharen."

"Captain, think." Kre'fey said, "This is a combined fleet, Daala's and Aref'ja's. They can call reinforcements in minutes and they will almost certainly outnumber us."

"Captain!" Tactical called again, "New ships, coming on the edge of the gravwell!"

Syal bit back a curse. "Report!"

"We're getting two Mon Cal cruisers moving in on *Vindicator*, another Bothan coming after *Liberty Star*..."

As he read the reports, three red markers appeared on the tactical holo. Then two more appeared, this time on the opposite end of the grav well.

Syal drew in breath; another *Imperial*-class destroyer had shown up, and the only thing between it and *Mon Dromeda* were two meager Lancer Frigates.

"Get online with *Celestial*!" Syal told communications. "Tell them to get off their butts and block that Impstar! *Now!*"

"Captain..." the communication officer said, "We're not getting any reply from the Chiss."

Syal looked at the sole blue marker that was Commodore Fel's ship. It was just sitting there, apart from the rest of the battle, doing nothing at all.

"They're not going to come," Tahiri said softly.

Syal shuddered with the certainty she was right. She'd never truly trusted Wynssa Fel or her people, and now they were abandoning Trinity Fleet at the worst moment.

"Put down the grav wells!" Kre'fey barked so loud the entire bridge could hear. "Let them run!"

"We can't!" Syal slammed her fist on the countertop. "They could have Solo, or Fy'lyor!"

"If we fight now we'll tear each other to pieces!" Kre'fey snarled. "We can't risk it!"

"I am in command now!" Syal barked. "*You* are not Admiral anymore, and I am *not* letting them get away with any more of our people!"

"If we fight them here the mission fails! Win *or* lose!" Kre'fey scratched his claws on the console's surface. "Do *not* let your emotions cloud your judgment!"

Syal wanted to shout back a reply, but she realized the entire bridge had stopped in the middle of a chaotic fight to stare at her. Her failure felt greater than ever before.

In the sudden awkward quiet, Veila reached out and put a hand on her forearm. The small woman's eyes shone with intensity. She said, "We won't get them back fighting today."

"But we can't-" Syal was ashamed by the tears forming in her eyes, tears for all her crew to see. "I can't lose any more-"

"We don't have to lose them," Tahiri insisted. "We *won't*."

Syal wiped the wetness from her eyes. She didn't believe Tahiri. She knew deep in her heart this was the end, the last failure, and a part of her wanted to go out blazing, to see Tiom and Myri again at last, but a tiny part of her knew she couldn't take her whole crew down, not like this.

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Her voice cracked as she said, "Communications, tell Omphlem to drop the gravity well."

"Yes, Captain!" the comm lieutenant said with audible relief.

Syal watched the tactical holo in grim silence. The gravity well went down. The new star destroyer turned around and jumped back to hyperspace first. Then the Mon Cal Cruisers, then the Bothan ships. The last to go was *Chimaera*. When Syal finally turned to face the viewport, she saw *Justifier* dying alone in space.

"Captain," the lieutenant from Tactical called. "Sir, *Celestial*... She's just..."

When Syal looked back to the holo she knew what she'd see. The Chiss vessel's blue marker was gone. It took all Syal's strength not to fall to her knees under the weight of her latest, greatest failure.

Chapter 12

Vestara Khai had seen these One Sith in action, and she still didn't know what to think.

To her surprise, there hadn't been much action. Whatever strange ships had been pulled into the Yuuzhan Vong fleet's gravity well, they belonged to one of the races native to the Unknown Regions. Their strange, insect-like mechanical drones swarmed over the Yuuzhan Vong fleet even after the gravity well was dropped, tearing open an entire frigate within the first few minutes of battle.

She had watched all of this from the bridge of *Revenge*, that strange Rakatan vessel. It took only a dozen beings to control it, and except for Darth Nether, none of them bore the red-and-black tattoos Vestara had assumed to be the symbol of these One Sith. Perhaps these other beings, drawn from a variety of species, were not Sith Lords at all, but merely their helpers. As she reached out with the Force, she felt Nether and Vidious shining more brightly with dark side energy than the rest of the crew.

Despite the initial shock of the attack, the Yuuzhan Vong fleet managed to outfight these strange vessels. However, just when it seemed the enemy was on the brink of annihilation, the first Yuuzhan Vong frigate winked out

of existence as its dovin basals pulled it into hyperspace. Others promptly followed.

"I don't understand," she'd looked to Vidious. "They've almost won."

"This was to be a place of ambush," the Devaronian had shook his head. "We've no place to hide now."

A moment later, Nether had shouted a command to the Bith at the astrogation station, and *Revenge* had joined the rest of the fleet in hyperspace.

When *Revenge* returned to realspace, it was surrounded by twice as many Yuuzhan Vong vessels. It looked like a massive field of asteroids as it drifted just above the axis of a silvery ring of ice fragments slowly spinning over a cold blue gas giant.

Her first instinct was to think them cowards. What Sith ran from a fight, especially one they'd just about won? Of course, that had been her own people's philosophy and look where it had gotten them. These One Sith, whatever they were, had been made a different breed. They seemed to treasure secrecy and pick their battles carefully. She found that, despite his different personality, Darth Nether's Force-persona was much like Vidious's; rather than hot anger it was marked by cold determination, a patient ruthless desire rather than a desperate hunger.

Darth Vidious did not try to justify their flight from battle. Perhaps he assumed Vestara would figure out their reasons on her own. Instead, he took her by the shoulder and said to her, "Come. We should show our find to Lord Wyyrlok. He should be most interested in hearing your story."

Since he didn't give her a choice, she followed without a word.

After another journey through dimly luminous corridors, watching the ancient ship's life-blood pulse beneath the skin of the walls and ceiling, Vidious brought her to another room not unlike the one where they had met Darth Nether. This one, however, contained a tall throne, carved from some black chitinous substance, beneath the pointed center of the ceiling. On it sat a figure in black robes. Two tall horns protruded from the top of its head, while two more hung from tentacles around his neck and rested against his chest. One of the cranial horns was half-broken off, probably from some past battle. A Chagrian, Vestara thought. Like Nether and Vidious, his face was a curious pattern of black and red tattoos.

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His head was bowed as if in meditation and did not raise when Vestara and Vidious stepped into the room.

Vidious cleared his throat. "Lord Wyyrlok, I have returned from my mission to Yavin 4, and I have brought spoils."

Without lifting his head, the Sith on the throne rumbled, "Did you lead those aliens to us?"

"No, my Lord. Darth Nether believes that they were crossing through this space and were pulled in by the gravity well."

"This encounter was *most* unfortunate. The trap was sprung too early, and by the wrong prey."

"I am sure My Lord will find a new plan." Vidious hoisted the satchel with Naga Sadow's holocrons. "Perhaps *these* may be of assistance."

Wyyrlok looked up, finally. His eyes were a mix of red and gold, like that of most Sith, but these seemed to blaze across the room. He asked, "Have you attempted to access them yet?"

"I was waiting for you to have that honor, My Lord."

"Good." Wyyrlok grunted. He pushed himself off the throne and stepped carefully across the floor, trailing a pool of black-as-night robes behind him. He didn't even look at Vestara as he approached, and she frankly didn't mind. She could feel the power from this Chagrian, dormant but waiting to be unleashed. Yet still, she felt as though even Wyyrlok was just a dim star compared to the power she'd felt when arriving on *Revenge*. It had to be their mysterious leader, whoever or *whatever* he was.

Vidious seemed to treat Wyyrlok as leader in himself. He handed the satchel over to the Chagrian, and Wyyrlok fished through its contents. He pulled out one red pyramid and held it up to the light.

"Marvelous," he breathed. "You have done well, Lord Vidious."

"I had fine assistance," Vidious put a hand on Vestara's shoulder. "Lady Khai of Kesh was a great help."

"Kesh?" Wyyrlok looked at her, finally. She didn't need the Force to feel his disdain. "We have encountered a few of your people. They were... most foolish."

"Because they all got themselves killed fighting the Jedi?" she asked.

Wyyrlok raised one eyebrow, perhaps surprised by her bluntness. "Among other reasons."

"Well I'm not dead," Vestara put pride in her voice. It didn't take much effort; she saw the missteps her people had taken that had led to their destruction, and she knew changes had to be made. It was why she did not judge these One Sith for fleeing the battle. Unlike the Lost Tribe, these One Sith clearly had more important things to do than slaughter all challengers. They were playing a long game of some kind.

Wyyrlok regarded her coolly with his hot gold eyes. "And why did you survive when your people were wiped out, Lady Khai?"

She hesitated, wondering what to tell this man to gain his approval. She knew very well that being found unworthy could mean her death. She also knew she stood before a Force-user more experienced and powerful than any one she'd ever met save Luke Skywalker. If she tried to lie or obfuscate, he would know.

She took a deep breath, held those terrible flame-red eyes, and told him everything.

Her story took a long time to tell. She talked about her father, about apprenticeship to Lady Rhea, about the discovery of Ship. She talked about what her father and Lord Taalon had attempted in the Maw, and how she had come to travel with Luke and Ben Skywalker. She saw new fire in Wyyrlok's eyes when she mentioned that name. Knowing he could have sensed subterfuge, she admitted the feelings she had for Ben Skywalker, and detailed the lives she had taken in order to protect the young man whom she had loved. She talked about betraying the Jedi and the Lost Tribe both.

She tried to think of the last time she had ever told the truth to someone like this. Maybe she never had. What she didn't tell him was that she wished she could have unburdened this to a man she trusted instead of a man she feared.

But she had a feeling Wyyrlok sensed even that.

She didn't know how long she spoke for, but when she was done her mouth was dry and her throat was sore. She bowed her head to signal that she was finished and waited for some judgment to be passed on her.

Wyyrlok seemed to take forever to speak, but when he did he said, "You have a very unique tale, Vestara Khai."

"It has been a long journey, Lord Wyyrlok."

"And now you come to offer yourself to the One Sith?"

"I believe I have much to offer you, My Lord."

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"How much do you understand of what we are doing?"

"Very little," she admitted. "But I am eager to learn."

Wyyrlok snorted. "There is much you do not know. Much you never shall."

Vestara felt icy fear in her gut. "I will serve you the best I can, Lord Wyyrlok."

"From what you have told me, you serve no one but *yourself*. You switch sides again and again to further your interests."

"Ambition is a Sith trait, My Lord." She was terrified of this man but had to show him, or try to show him, that she was not, because she knew fear would get her killed.

"Indeed it is. But the One Sith are not just *any* Sith. We also *serve*."

"Please explain to me, My Lord. I want to understand but I can't if you don't tell me."

A long silence lingered where Vestara didn't dare look up. She heard a deep rattling sound, and realized after a moment that Wyyrlok was chuckling.

"The One Sith are like none that have ever come before," Wyyrlok said. "We are guided by my Master's design. We *serve* it, above all else, even our own ambition. Can you do that, Lady Khai? Can you take your own ruthless need to survive and suppress it in the name of that design?"

"What is that design, My Lord?"

"The eradication of the Jedi and the dominance of the Sith over the entire galaxy, of course."

That seemed to be the only design any Sith ever had, and she was getting a little sick of it. "My Lord, the Lost Tribe had a similar goal."

"My Master has been planning this for the better part of a century. Now the Jedi are weak and the galaxy divided. Thanks to failed Sith like your Tribe and Darth Caedus, our time of ascension is at hand."

"Where do the Yuuzhan Vong fit into this, My Lord?"

"The Yuuzhan Vong sow chaos and destruction wherever they go. They are *made* for the dark side. A pity they cannot touch it, but if they did, I suspect the entire *universe* would be in flames." He sounded like a man contemplating a tasty meal. "They are too few in number to ravage the galaxy as they once did, but their very presence will help tear the Alliance apart. What they break, we shall remake in our image."

"Then what are you waiting for?" she asked. It came out ruder than she intended and she wondered if she'd just brought on her own death.

Instead Wyyrlok chuckled again. She *hated* that noise. He said, "We have spies everywhere. In addition to the renegade fleet we hunt, two more forces have entered the Unknown Regions searching for us. Aboard them are three Jedi, and not just *any* Jedi. Tahiri Veila, apprentice to Darth Caedus. Jaina Solo, the so-called Sword." He leaned in close. Vestara felt his rancid breath at the side of her face. "The third is Ben Skywalker. Tell me, Lady Khai, what would you do if you see him again?"

She fought back a shudder. Because she knew she couldn't lie, she said, "I don't know."

"At least you are... honest," Wyyrlok's low voice was almost a purr.

"My Lord, do we know where these fleets are?" Vidious asked. Vestara had almost forgotten he was there.

"We are hunting them now," Wyyrlok said. "Our Yuuzhan Vong allies are quite familiar with this region of space. They know all the best places to hide."

"What happens when you find them?" Vestara asked.

A red-and-black hand reached down and gently took her by the chin. Wyyrlok tilted her face upward so her eyes had no choice but to look into his.

"Lady Khai, I think we shall find out *together*."

Chapter 13

When she awoke, her first thought was of failure.

Fy'lyor found herself lying on a hard flat bunk, staring up at a blank white wall onto which she could write all her recrimination and regret. She thought of everything that had led her here: her energy as a child, the drive that took her to the academy, the constant feelings of loneliness and unease, the pride at being elevated in the ranks, culminating in the ultimate honor of being put in charge of such a crucial mission. All of it had been stained irreversibly black by her failure.

As she lay in *Chimaera's* brig (she knew on instinct that was where she was) Fy'lyor had plenty of time to ponder all of its horrible results. She wondered how many brave souls had died aboard *Justifier*. She wondered how many had been captured. She wondered if a great battle had ensued, and if so, who had won. She wondered how many Alliance or Chiss soldiers had died because she had been caught by surprise and found herself grieving for them too.

She didn't know how long she'd been out for, and she had no way of knowing how long she lay on her bunk, staring at the writing on the wall. She still wore her uniform, but it had been stripped of everything, from her hold-out blaster to the rank badge on her chest. They'd even taken her boots.

When the door opened, she snapped to attention. She threw herself off the bunk, onto the balls of her bare red feet, and stood straight to face Admiral Daala through the pale shimmer of her cell's energy barrier.

She had seen Daala in holos countless times, but never in person. None of them had conveyed the predatory intent that blazed in her one visible eye. The old woman stood with back straight and shoulders squared. She took long, agile steps like someone half her age. Fy'lyor did her best to mirror Daala's stern posture, because there was absolutely nothing else she could do.

Daala observed her wordlessly for a long moment. That one eye seemed to drift down and up over Fy'lyor, taking her in, and she felt that Daala was looking far more deeply into her than other officers who gave her the same down-up look.

Still, Daala didn't speak. Fy'lyor felt like she was sharing the brig with a nexu, but if Daala was going to torture her then torture it would be; talking out of turn would hardly hurt her. She cleared her throat and spoke.

"Lieutenant Colonel Fy'lyor, Imperial Star Destroyer *Justifier*. I would like to know what happened to my ship."

Daala looked at her blankly for what seemed like horrifying forever. Finally, the old woman said, "Your ship was destroyed. I'm truly sorry, Lieutenant Colonel."

If there was supposed to be genuine sympathy in that voice, Fy'lyor certainly didn't hear it. "What about my crew?"

"Many ejected into escape pods," Daala said. "We did not interfere with them."

"How many have you taken prisoner?" Fy'lyor asked.

"Two," Daala held up as many fingers. "Yourself included."

"Two," Fy'lyor repeated. She thought back to her bridge officers, and wondered how many of them had escaped, and how many had died fighting the Manda-orian boarding parties. Even though she knew the answer, she asked, "Who was the second?"

"Jaina Solo."

"How did you know we would both be on *Justifier*?"

"The same way we knew to capture Commander Fel. We were spying on your fleet and intercepting and decoding your transmissions."

"What about the rest of the fleet?"

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"We did not fight them further. We sought to remove their leadership and their most powerful vessel in one blow, and we have."

"They are professional soldiers, even the Alliance. They'll continue with their mission."

"*Their* mission?" Daala raised a gray eyebrow. "Not *ours*?"

"I don't expect to see them again. You intend to torture me, don't you?" Fy'lyor tilted her head back defiantly. After all she'd been through, all she'd failed, she could at least face her pain like a soldier of the Empire. "I won't tell you anything, even if you have to kill me."

A smile curved Daala's thin lips. It seemed unnatural on her lined, stern face. "I'm glad to see the Academy hasn't lowered its standards. It still produces tough officers."

"No one lowered standards for me," Fy'lyor said. Daala hit on an old wound. "I raised myself to theirs."

Daala's lips curled a little more. "Tell me, Lieutenant Colonel, why did you join the Academy? Why did you pledge yourself in service of the Empire?"

Fy'lyor looked across the energy barrier uncertainly. She had expected to be hauled somewhere and tortured by now. She said, "I wished to help bring strength and order to the galaxy."

"Yes, but *whose* order?" Daala asked. "I don't need to remind you what you are, Lieutenant Colonel. A female, and an alien. How many of your kind do you see in the Moff Council, or the naval high command?"

"None yet," Fy'lyor said. Back at the academy, when faced with skeptical human classmates and instructors, she'd delivered that response with a cocky grin. Now it seemed like a bitter reminder of everything she would never accomplish.

Daala, however, seemed pleased. "Then why did you join, Lieutenant Colonel?"

"Because I believe in the values of the Empire."

"Most of your kind fawns over the Alliance."

"In the past five years the Alliance has seen three coups and a civil war. I see nothing worth respect." It was all true, but she couldn't help but feel Daala was trying to lead her into some trap.

The old woman kept her tight smile. "You are a credit to the Empire, Lieutenant Colonel."

"Enough," Fy'lyor hissed. "Are you going to torture me or not?"

Daala actually shrugged. "I hoped we could come to an accommodation. You could be of great service, Lieutenant Colonel."

"What kind of service?" Fy'lyor frowned. "You just murdered hundreds of my crew. You can't possibly expect me to join you."

"I'm very sorry for what happened to your people," Daala said, "But I did not murder them."

"You rammed that Tylonian ship into mine!" Fy'lyor grew angry. "You sent Mandalorian thugs to kill my crew. Do you think I could ever forgive you? Do you think I could *ever* stand by your side?"

"Your crew died because they were fighting for a lie," Daala said. "I'm not the one who murdered them. Fel and Reige did."

Fy'lyor shook her head. The old woman was mad. "Fel and Reige are fine leaders, better than *you* ever were."

For a tiny second, Daala looked hurt. Then the woman recomposed herself. "I admit that I have made mistakes. I will, in fact, admit that I should never have taken the position as Galactic Alliance Chief of State in the first place."

"You're kriffing right," Fy'lyor hissed, not even caring about her profanity.

Apparently Daala didn't either. She said, "I'm not a politician. I'm not a manager. I'm a soldier. I see a cause and I fight for it. I fought the decadence and hypocrisy of the New Republic. I fought the savagery of the Yuuzhan Vong. I fought the bigotry of the moffs and I tried to fight the arrogant, lawless cult called the Jedi."

Daala took a step forward. Were it not for the energy barrier, Fy'lyor could have reached out and touched her. The old woman said, "I have never stopped fighting for what I believe in, Lieutenant Colonel. If you wish to demonize me for that, then please, make me your devil."

"Fine," Fy'lyor snarled. "Because I will *never* forget the people you killed. *My* people."

"You're young, and I can tell you have much pride," Daala said. "I recommend you put it aside and consider how many people will be killed if the Vong are not stopped."

"The Vong *were* stopped, fifteen years ago."

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"No," Daala shook her head. "They were defeated and the Alliance let them go, because the *Jedi* told them to." Daala used the name like a curse. "So that they could salvage their precious consciences, they put the entire galaxy at risk of a second war of annihilation."

"The Yuuzhan Vong were disarmed. Their warships were cast into the heart of a sun-"

"Clearly some survived, or worse, they grew more. Because you are young and did not fight them, I don't expect you to understand, Lieutenant Colonel. But let me tell you this: The Yuuzhan Vong are born to make war. They live it, breathe it, love it. They cannot be turned peaceful by the wishful thinking of a few self-righteous Force-wizards. They will fight until they are turned to dust because fighting is all they are. They can never stop. I know this, because I am the same way."

Fy'lyor found it hard to look away from the smolder of her sole eye. The conviction in her voice shook Fy'lyor to the bone. She managed to say, "I am a soldier of the Empire. I will not betray the orders I was given."

Daala snorted. "Fel disobeys orders left and right. The man may look like a good soldier but he is a changeling, always shifting and squirming into new positions to please his Jedi keeper."

"My orders came directly from Head-of-State Reige."

"Reige is a fool. He dishonors the memory of his mentor. He's been seduced by Fel, just as Fel has been seduced by the Jedi." Daala took another step closer, so close her face nearly pressed into the energy field. "Lieutenant Colonel, your people need not have died in vain. They can still make the galaxy a safer place for all."

"I will never help you exterminate the Yuuzhan Vong," Fy'lyor said.

"Then you will die here," Daala said, softly. "Your life, your hopes and dreams and struggles, will be as wasted as theirs."

Fy'lyor scowled but said nothing. Daala stepped back from the energy barrier and said, "I still need to talk to our other prisoner. I suggest you think my offer over, Lieutenant Colonel. You might yet have a chance."

"A chance for what?" Fy'lyor asked.

"Redemption," said Daala. Then the old woman turned. The door opened for her and hissed shut behind her, leaving Fy'lyor still standing on her bare feet, staring through the walls of her cage at nothing, feeling nothing except a yawning emptiness inside.

When you'd been a bounty hunter for as long as Boba Fett, you learned how to size up people quickly. It was one of the reasons Daala had sent him over to *Phoenix*, and he'd already sent his evaluation back to her via the portable, encrypted communications device they'd brought over from *Chimaera*.

He'd gotten a good grasp of Captain Elscor Loro pretty easily: Hard-edged, ruthless, with a lot of anger built up over a lifetime of battle and loss, but also with the streak of idealism that had made her a brave Rebel almost half a century ago. Admiral Bren Aref'ja had taken a little longer to peg, but only a little. His polite, well-groomed, officer-and-gentleman act wasn't an act, it was what he *was*, but in addition to being an officer-and-gentlemen he had a calculating Bothan mind and his own deep anger that was no less than Loro's for being hidden,

In short, Boba Fett did not underestimate either of them. Likewise, they did not underestimate him. He was actually glad for the knife-edge tension that accompanied all of their interactions; the last thing he wanted was to feel at home on a ship that could turn hostile at any moment. Not that he felt at home anywhere nowadays.

The decision to take prisoners had been an interesting one. When planning the attack on *Justifier*, Daala had shown a keen interest in her captain, one Fy'lyor, a young female Twi'lek who was everything you didn't expect from an Imperial officer and probably everything Daala wanted one to be. It was also possible she had important knowledge about Vitor Reige's plans for the Empire that could be useful. Daala also had no love for Jaina Solo and seemed to relish the thought of torturing the "Jedi witch." At the same time, Daala had *also* been eager to take Jagged Fel, whom she credited with her fall into disgrace after losing the Imperial elections two years before.

It had been Aref'ja who'd suggested the compromise. Daala's three nimble Marauder corvettes would help capture Fel, while the Mando troops on *Chimaera* would be best suited to board *Justifier* and capture Fy'lyor and Solo. Daala had been reluctant, and it had actually been Lecersen who convinced her to share the bounty, in the cause of building goodwill between the Imperial and renegade Alliance fleets.

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Lecersen, of course, was slimier than a drool-covered Hutt, but Fett couldn't figure out his angle, not yet. He did, however, plan to take advantage of the gift they'd been given.

Once Fett and his two shuttle captains were secure in *Phoenix's* brig, Fett met with Loro and Aref'ja to discuss what to do with Jagged Fel.

"He'll need to be interrogated, of course," Loro said as they stood around the conference table in Aref'ja's command salon. The expression on her face was cold and a little regretful. She looked like a woman who was not opposed to torture on principle but regretted it in this case.

"I'd like to talk to him in person first," Aref'ja said. "Fel is a reasonable man by all accounts."

"In that case, you're in trouble," Fett said. "He's never going to support wiping out the crab boys. Too much honor and goodie-goodie Jedi talk."

"Maybe so," Aref'ja admitted. "But I want to try before we resort to torture. He's a man, not one of *them*."

Fett wondered how much Aref'ja's calm mask would slip when the time came to fight the Vong. He thought it could be quite a show.

"Did you bring your own interrogators?" Fett asked. "Or do you want my boys to do it?"

The look between Aref'ja and Loro was hard to miss. The Bothan asked, "Are you familiar with interrogation, or just capture and assassination?"

"I've done some of everything," Fett said. "One of my people has particular experience with 'interrogation.'"

Jaller was, according to Venku, one of the best torturers on Mandalore, but if Aref'ja wanted to keep using euphemisms, that was fine.

"I would like to talk to him, alone," Aref'ja said. "I'll allow interrogation if, only *if*, I am not satisfied with the results of my conversation. Is that understood?"

"Very." Fett nodded. He glanced at Loro. The old woman was staring down at the table, saying nothing.

"In that case, I will go down to the brig now," Aref'ja said.

"Question." Loro picked her head up. "What do we say when he asks questions?"

Aref'ja ears twitched. "What kind of questions?"

"When he asks what happened in the battle, do we tell him the truth?"

Fett watched another long look between the two. He said, "If you tell him his fleet was wiped out, that will only make him angry. Defiant."

"What if we tell him his wife is dead?" Loro asked. "He's no Jedi. He can't sense that kind of thing, can he?"

"Unlikely," Fett said. "It would probably break him."

Arefja fur flattened on his face. "I will tell him *Justifier* was lost with all hands."

For some reason that made Loro look relieved. Maybe she was hoping to break Fel without resorting to physical torture. Strange priorities, that one. It was almost like she'd suddenly become squeamish.

Arefja turned and walked out with purposeful strides. A moment later Loro went out onto her bridge. Fett stared at the empty conference room for a moment, then went off to find his torturer.

When Jaina awoke in *Chimaera's* brig, the first thing she felt was emptiness.

Everything around her- the hard bunk, the pale featureless walls, the minute drone of the energy barrier separating her cell from the small viewing chamber- echoed with a resounding *lack*. The Force was gone. She felt as though something had torn a hole through the center of her being.

She tried to make sense of her jumbled memories. The attack on *Justifier*, the fight in the corridors, the searing energy of a stun blast hitting her in the back, and finally the sight of two Mandalorian T-visor helmets, battered and familiar, looming over her as everything went black.

The memory of Venku and Gotab was a painful one, not just because they had once helped her, but because they recalled the nightmarish weeks when her twin brother had been running amok, destroying and killing in the name of peace, and she had tasked herself with the awful burden of bringing him down. That had been the worst time of her life, even worse than when she thought both brothers had died during the Yuuzhan Vong War. Most of the time she simply put it out of her memory and tried not to think about it, but now that awful time had returned to hurt her again.

She was, therefore, actually a little relieved when the door opened and Admiral Daala stepped into the viewing chamber. She wore a white uniform

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that recalled a grand admiral's, and her red-streaked gray hair was tied in a long braid at her back.

Lurking behind Daala, almost sulking, was a girl about Ben's age. Her dark hair was cropped short above her shoulders and she was dressed in civilian clothes. Her brows were drawn forward and her mouth curved slightly downward, giving her an expression of a seemingly-perpetual scowl.

Jaina rose to her feet and looked at Daala across the faint blur of the force field. She asked, "So how did you do it? Ysalamiri?"

"They have a history aboard this ship," Daala nodded slightly. "They were not easy to acquire on short notice, but fortunately I have connections."

"So you expected to capture Jedi, did you?" Jaina crossed her arms over her chest.

"It was always possible," Daala nodded again. "I wanted to be prepared."

Jaina glanced at the girl. "Who's your friend?"

Daala chuckled. It sounded like a wheezing acklay. "Pardon my rudeness. Jaina Solo, meet Miss Miranda Fardreamer, one of Admiral Aref'ja observers from *Phoenix*."

Jaina remembered the name from Ben's report on his encounter at Tatooine. She kept her face blank and studied the teenage girl. She didn't look happy to be under Daala's wing.

"So what is this?" Jaina asked Miranda. "Some kind of exchange program? You come over from *Phoenix*, Daala sends one of hers?"

"More than one," Miranda said. "Four, I think."

"Among them, Boba Fett," Daala said. "At this moment, I suspect he is... administering questioning to your husband."

Jaina tried to hide her alarm. For all she knew, this could be some game Daala was playing. "Who else have you captured?"

"We also have Captain Fy'lyor aboard this ship," Daala said. "I'm sure she will cooperate in time. I'm not sure about you, though. You are a stubborn woman, Jaina Solo."

"Look who's talking," Jaina snorted. "And if you think Red is pliable, you haven't spent much time with her."

"I haven't," Daala admitted. "However, she is not my concern at the moment. You are."

"Do you plan on torturing me? Because I don't even know a lot."

"I find that hard to believe."

"I mean it. I've never seen this Vong fleet. I don't know where Zonama Sekot is. You know I'll never help you wipe out an entire species. So really, I don't see a point." Jaina tried to adopt a posture of confident defiance, but deep inside two words pounded fear in her chest: *Alpha Red*. If Daala learned about that and got her hands on it, the results would be disastrous.

Daala eyed Jaina carefully, then asked Miranda, "Do you believe her?"

"It's possible she's telling the truth," the girl admitted. "Maybe even likely."

Daala sighed and looked back at her prisoner. "So you're just flailing about in the dark, are you, Jaina Solo? It must be very frightening, and very lonely, to be wandering the unknown in search of a great danger."

"Comes with the job."

"Ah, but you are not a Jedi right now, are you, Solo? You are just a normal person with no incredible magic powers that elevate you above the rest of us mortals." Daala crossed her arms over her chest. "Don't worry, though, you'll get used to it. Us mortals do."

"So that's it? You're just going to gloat? I expected more than that."

"Well, there *are* other options... Tell me, I've heard that when some Jedi die, their spirits linger in the Force. Life after death, in a way, which always sounded too good to be true. Have you ever met one of these 'Force ghosts,' Jaina Solo? Have you met your aunt or brothers?"

Jaina didn't know where she was going with this, but she didn't like it. Daala was taunting her with the deaths of her loved ones.

She balled her hands into angry fists and said, "I have not. Personally."

"Personally?" Daala seemed genuinely curious. "So has your uncle met his dead wife, for instance?"

Jaina swallowed. She'd heard from Ben and Uncle Luke about their encounters in the Maw, about how they had met Aunt Mara and her brothers and even spoke with them. A part of her had always been skeptical, not of what they said, but of what they'd really seen; true Force spirits or some illusion conjured by their own hopes and desires. Maybe it was because she didn't want to believe her twin brother was still trapped in some Force-purgatory, arrogant and bitter and unredeemed.

"Ask him," Jaina said at last.

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"Maybe later," Daala shrugged. "But here is my question, Jaina Solo. If you die right here, right now, locked away from the Force by the ysalamiri... Do you think your spirit will live on?"

Jaina shivered. She'd fought countless battles, risked her life countless times, lost countless friends and loved ones. She'd never known if her spirit would endure in the Force after death, never *could* know, and tried to act on simple faith that it would be so. Here, though, Daala could just shut down the force-field, take out a blaster, and shoot her. It could be over, *all* over in a second, and she could do nothing about it. It made her feel vulnerable and, yes, afraid. Daala saw that and smiled.

"One more question, Jaina Solo," the old woman said. "What do you think will happen to your husband when he dies?"

Fear was replaced by anger. Jaina nearly threw herself into the force-field. "Don't you *dare* hurt Jag! Don't even *think* it!"

Daala shrugged. "He's not in my hands. He is aboard *Phoenix*, with Aref'ja... and Boba Fett. From what I've seen of him, Aref'ja is not a being to do his torture by hand. Fett and his Mandalorians, however..."

"No!" Jaina insisted. "If you hurt him, hurt him at *all*, I will *never* cooperate!"

"That's one possibility. I have a few other things to attend to, but I believe several of Fett's friends wanted to see you. I'm sure they can tell you a little more of his preferred... questioning techniques."

Daala turned. Miranda joined her and both walked out of the room. Jaina sunk back on her bunk, feeling suddenly sick and exhausted and afraid all at once. Her head spun with all the possibilities that were coming her way, and not a one of them was good.

The door opened again and two Mandalorians, faceless in full armor and helmets, walked in. One wore a battered burgundy set of armor; the other an eclectic mishmash of multi-colored plates salvaged from the suits of at least a dozen fallen comrades.

Both had two lightsabers dangling from their belts.

"How does it feel to be called Fett's friends?" Jaina asked them.

"Like absolute *osik*," Gotab grunted.

"But you're working with him. Is it because of that nanovirus, the one targeting Fett genes?" Fett had always had a stand-offish relationship with his father's people, and Jaina was a little surprised to see him prowling

around with the Skirata clan in search of an antidote that would let him go to a planet he didn't even like.

"Most of the Skirata clan is with us," Venku said. "Those who made it off Mandalore after they dropped the virus into the atmosphere."

"I'm sorry," Jaina said sincerely. She glanced at Gotab. "You're not susceptible to the virus, are you?"

"My family is," the old man said. "Daala and Lecersen have promised us an antidote."

"And you trust those *sleemos*?" Jaina asked.

The conversation was probably being recorded but she didn't care. The two Mandalorians exchanged wordless looks.

"If anyone can get us an antidote, it's Lecersen," Venku said at last.

Jaina sighed. "Well. No offense, but I hoped I'd never see you again."

"The galaxy works in mysterious ways," Venku shrugged.

An old memory flitted back to Jaina, and against it all she smiled a little. Fett had been no fan of the Skirata clan back when she'd known him and Boba Fett was not a man who changed easily. She said, "If it's any consolation, Fett's probably having even less fun being around you than you are with him."

"That's a possibility," Gotab said, with definite satisfaction in his voice.

Jaina took a deep breath. "I understand Fett's over on *Phoenix* now. Daala says he's going to torture my husband."

Venku inclined his helmet slightly.

"And what? Am I supposed to tell you some secret, otherwise you'll comm Fett and tell him to kill Jag?" Jaina growled. "That's pretty low, even for him."

"We haven't gotten those orders," Venku said. There was an unspoken *yet* at the end of his words.

"Okay, fine. So what, then? You just wanted to pop in and say 'hello, how have you been since we talked you into murdering your own brother?'"

"You made your own choice," Gotab said, almost gently.

"I know," Jaina admitted.

"I dare say it was the right one."

"I know," Jaina repeated. Her head sunk down and she stared at her feet. "I just... try not to think about it." Try not to think about Jacen, her twin brother, her constant companion and best friend for over half her life.

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"That's good," Gotab said. "It's a skill that took me a long time to learn."

"You?" Jaina's head snapped up. She was suddenly angry again. "You took off your robes so you could play hired killer. Because you wanted to pall around with your macho Mando buddies. I don't want to be like *you*."

Gotab flinched. His face was hidden, but through the Force she could tell he'd been hurt.

Venku said, "We wanted to see you, and remind you that if Fett gives an order, we *will* obey."

"Glad to see I mean so much to you," Jaina scowled.

"We only want to go home," Venku said. "We only want to be a family again."

Jaina felt a pang of curiosity. "What about Fett's granddaughter? Is Mirta with you?"

Venku shook his head. "As far as I know, Fett hasn't seen his granddaughter since before your brother was killed."

Suddenly it all came together for Jaina. When she'd crept aboard her brother's star destroyer to assassinate him, she'd found and freed a captive Mirta Gev. Fett's granddaughter had been captured on her last mission against Jacen and had been furious with what she saw as her grandfather's betrayal after he'd sent her on that mission. At the time, Jaina had been distracted with her own personal pain and had had little time since to think about Mirta's problems at all. But suddenly, at last, it all made sense.

Fett didn't want to go back to Mandalore. He wanted *Mirta* to be able to go back home, live the Mando life she wanted with her husband and his clan. Fett hid his emotions behind that battered helmet and decades of mental toughness, but deep down, Jaina knew he was ashamed of how he'd failed his family.

Boba Fett didn't want to go home. He wanted forgive-ness.

Redemption.

Jaina wondered if Gotab and Veku understood. Probably not; they'd never liked Fett and probably didn't care about *his* family problems when they were so busy with their own, just like *she* hadn't really cared about Fett's family when her own had been falling apart.

It was a long, agonized story of conflict and selfish-ness and she didn't know where or how the story ended. She just hoped, prayed, it didn't end in this cell.

"We'll be seeing you around, Jedi," Venku gave her a short nod, then turned for the door. Gotab lingered a little longer, watching her wordlessly behind his black visor. Then he turned and followed the other man out. The door slid shut behind them, leaving Jaina alone and empty once again.

"I learned a lot about torture from my father," Jaller Skirata said as he sat on a bench in *Phoenix's* locker room. He wore all of his armor except his helmet, and he was checking through all the nasty tricks he'd built into the arms of his combat suit.

Fett was on his feet, looking down and feeling slightly mesmerized by a face that was at once alien and held hints of his own. The middle-aged man had pale skin and auburn hair, but somehow the lines around his mouth and crow's feet at his eyes mirrored those of Boba Fett, and Jango Fett, and Jaller's clone father Fi.

"My *buir* got a real bad head injury in service of the Grand Army of the *shabla* Republic," Jaller continued as he examined the extensible electric probe on his right arm. "Would have died if it hadn't been for *Bard'ika's* Force powers. He survived, and ended up marrying a nice Mando woman, but he could never move the same. Or talk quite right."

"*Ba'buir* Ordo said he used be a real *mir'shebs*," Bess commented.

She and Dinua stood to one side, leaning against the lockers. Neither woman wore her Mando armor, but their black jumpsuits had enough hidden vibro-weapons and blasters to hold off any brave Alliance commando.

"My *buir* was very... quiet, at least around me," Jaller said. He checked something on his left arm. It looked like tiny mechanical tweezers. "But since he couldn't get around easily, he developed other skills."

"He got people to talk," Fett said, a little impatiently. Aref'ja hadn't called on them yet (though Fett knew he would), and he didn't want things to get held up by another Skirata family yarn.

"He was good at it, and he passed it on to me." Jaller said with a sad smile.

He seemed satisfied with his kit and stood up. He was a little shaky at first, as his one leg was still in a bacta cast. He was a little taller than Fett, but unlike everyone else in the room, Fett was wearing both suit and helmet.

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It was an easy way to never feel intimidated, even by someone who was bigger and younger than you.

"It's not something I enjoy," Jaller said, "But I do what I'm good at."

"As do we all," Fett said, and glanced at the women. "I want you two to put on your gear and go to the bridge. Just watch and show the flag, and if you see anything I *really* need to know, you call me. Understand?"

"Understood," Dinua nodded.

A chime sounded in Fett's headset, right on cue. He tapped the switch on his forearm gear and put his comlink on the private channel.

"Fett here," he said. "My people are standing by."

"I've talked to Mr. Fel." Aref'ja sounded tired. "He's yours to work with. I've prepared a room for you. Deck 7A, room C-12."

"Understood. Be there in five minutes."

He switched his helmet speaker back on and said, "Showtime, Jaller. Let's not be late."

Five minutes later, he and Jaller were walking down a pale white corridor and were met by two guards in Alliance uniforms and Aref'ja himself.

There was visible regret in the Bothan's gold eyes as he said, "Mr. Fett, the room is yours. I'll be observing from another station, of course."

"Of course," Fett said. There were several layers of warning in that statement, but Aref'ja didn't bother to sound threatening. It seemed like he'd really tried hard to convince Jagged Fel of the reasoned righteousness of his genocidal cause and was disappointed it hadn't taken.

Well, Fett always trusted pain more than reason.

"We'll take it from here," he said.

Aref'ja waved a paw and the guards stepped aside. Fett and Jaller walked into the room and the door hissed shut behind them.

Aref'ja's people had already made their preparations. Fel was strapped down to an elevated bed in the center of what was probably an auxiliary medical bay. Two arms swung out from the sides of the table and Fel was trapped in a cruciform position, arms outstretched, the bottom of his wrists facing the ceiling. Black bands were tightly strapped across his ankles, upper arms, mid-section, and forehead.

He couldn't move his head, but he clearly heard the hard pounding of the Mandalorians' boots on the floor tile. He said to the ceiling, "I won't tell you anything. No matter what you do."

"They always say that," Jaller remarked. His tone wasn't taunting or skeptical, just matter-of-fact.

Fett stepped up to the right side of the bed, Jaller to the other. Fett had never met Jagged Fel in person before and was surprised to find a man of slightly below average height, with a thin but fit build. His hair and trim beard were black except for a shock of white running from the scar on his forehead. His eyes, dark and alert, darted from one helmet to the other.

"So you're him, aren't you?" Fel's eyes settled on Fett. "You're the real Boba Fett."

"That's right," Fett acknowledged. "Meet my partner, Jaller Skirata. He'll be seeing to you today."

"It's a pleasure," Jaller said evenly.

Fel laughed with the release of nervous tension. His body rattled against its restraints. "I don't know any more than you do. I don't know where the Vong fleet is. I don't know where Zonama Sekot is. We're wandering blind just like you."

"That's what we're here to find out," Jaller said. He raised a forearm in over Fel's head. A tiny, needle-like probe extended from the armor around his wrist. It sizzled with electricity.

"This is a waste of time," Fel insisted. "I already explained all that to Aref-"

Jaller tapped the bare skin of his forearm and he cried in pain. Jaller held his arm back and Fel bit his lip to keep from crying out, even as his fingers still twitched with residual shock.

"You're going to give us something," Fett said. "Anything. We're not picky."

"I told you, I don't-"

He screamed again with another round of shocks. Once more he bit his lower lip to keep from screaming. He bit so hard soft skin tore and blood stained his lips and teeth.

Fett leaned in closer to Fel. "Throw them a bone. What have you got to lose? Your wife's dead. Your mission is lost."

"No," Fel insisted. He waved his head back and forth in denial. "I don't believe that. Not Jaina."

"*Justifier* was blown to bits. I saw it with my own eyes," Fett lied.

"No no no," Fel insisted. "Jaina is... tougher than that."

"She *was* tough," Fett admitted

A tiny pang of conscience knew what kind of pain it would cause to maim or kill her husband. Then he remembered his own family. He remembered Mirta, her resentment and his failure, and knew what he had to do to make amends.

If somebody else had to pay a price for putting his family back together, well, that was how it had to be. Boba Fett had spent a life benefitting from others' pain he wasn't going to stop now.

He made a gesture to Jaller. The Mandalorian lowered his right arm and raised his left. A tiny puff of flame appeared above his wrist and Jaller lowered it, slowly, toward Fel's cupped-open hand. The captive saw the flame from the corner of his eye and immediately balled his hand into a fist, to Jaller just shifted slightly and aimed the fire at the weak spot of his inner wrist. He held the flame a few centimeters above Fel's skin, enough so that the heat pulsed against his veins but didn't quite burn.

With visible effort, Fel tore his eyes away from the flame and looked at Boba Fett. He bore his bloodstained teeth in an angry grin and said, "If you kill me, Jaina will *murder* you. Believe me."

"Lots of people have tried. Nobody's succeeded so far," Fett reminded him, though in truth he did not look forward to a showdown with a revenge-crazed Jaina Solo. He liked the girl, as much as he was capable of liking a Jedi, and she was a lethal warrior.

He made a gesture. Jaller lowered the flame against Fel's wrist. The man howled as the flame scorched his skin and blood vessels. When Jaller pulled the fire away, Fel's fingers twitched violently as wisps of thin smoke rose from the blackened patch of flesh.

The man was staring dead up at the ceiling, taking deep agonized breaths. Fett glanced at Jaller's faceless mask, wondering what the Mando was thinking. Fett himself had done torture from time to time, but he'd never enjoyed it and tried to avoid it. Torture was too intimate. You got to see what a man was like when you stripped away his self-control and it usually wasn't pretty. Mostly, it was pitiable.

"Why?" Fel rasped after another minute of heavy breathing. "Daala... Paid you?"

Fett inclined his head in a small nod.

Realization flickered in Fel's stunned eyes. "Less... Lecersen... Antidote?"

Fett gestured to his partner. Jaller stepped back from Fel's arm and turned to his head. He fired the little torch again and brought it low over Fel's head, so the light danced in his eyes. Fett watched the captive's face closely. He saw fear, and also resolve.

"You're hiding something," Fett said.

Fel shook his head, but his eyes stayed on the looming point of flame.

"Do you know where Zonama Sekot is?" Fett asked.

"No," Fel shook his head. "Alliance... Lost track of it. During the last war."

Fett snorted amusement. "That sounds like them. They can't manage anything right."

Fel licked the sides of his lips, smearing blood. "You... trust Lecersen?"

"About as much as you did," Fett said. Sure, Arefja might report it to Daala, but what would she do? She didn't trust him either.

"Then why?" Fel croaked.

"Because he made the nanovirus that keeps us from going home," Fett said. His *us* meant himself and his granddaughter, but let Jaller think it included him too.

"Lecersen... Has antidote?"

"He'll *make* one," Jaller insisted.

Fel's body shook with another round of laughter. "Oh... okay... *That* sounds... promising."

"We're talking about *you*, not us," Fett reminded him.

He reached out and grabbed Fel's left hand. He wrapped his palm around Fel's forefinger and gave it a yank. There was a popping sound as it tore from its joint. Fel screamed and thrashed in his bonds. Jaller's flame still hovered over his head.

"You've got nine more fingers," Fett said, "Plus ten toes. We can keep going for a while."

"You don't... You don't have to do this," Fel panted.

"If we want to go home, yes we do," Jaller said firmly. "And no offense, *aruettii*, but my family means a lot more to me than yours."

Jagged Fel's body racked with more laughter. It wasn't the laughter of man driven crazy by pain- Fett had seen that often enough- but it sounded knowing, almost arrogant.

"My family," Fel said, "Can help you... *way* more than Less... Lecersen..."

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Fett pulled his middle finger out. Fel screamed, writhed. Fett leaned in closer and lowered his voice. "Explain fast or you lose another digit."

Fel's eyes settled on Fett's mirror-black visor. "My... sister... Wyn captains the Chiss vessel in our fleet. And the Chiss are... the best bio-engineers in the *galaxy*."

"*Osik*," Jaller whispered, skeptical yet hopeful.

"It's true." Fel's teeth chattered through his pain. "The Chiss... helped *make* that nanovirus tech... Shared a little with the Empire... You understand? All Less... Lecersen's got is a copy..."

Fel gave a shaky, bloody, proud smile. "Free me, and we'll make your antidote."

Fett froze in shock, stared into Fel's eyes. Through the shock and pain of his torture, there was the utter confidence of a man who believed he was telling the truth.

Fett pulled back and said, "Jaller, take out his eye."

The other Mando was stunned. "*Mand'alor*, he-"

"Do it!" Fett snapped.

Jaller obeyed. He formed his hand into a first and a slim wedge-shaped blade extended from above his knuckles. He held Fel's face steady with one hand, even as the man screamed for them to stop. All it took was a quick flick of the wrist and there was a welling patch of red where Fel's left eye had been.

That was when the Alliance security people barged in. They shouted for the Mandos to step away from the prisoner. Two even had their blasters leveled and aimed. Fett and Jaller stepped back, hands in the air, while the guards and a medic swarmed over Jagged Fel.

Aref'ja appeared a minute later, as the medic was still mopping up the blood on Fel's face. The Bothan's fur was bristling with anger. His ears were flat against his skull, his canines were bared, and his golden eyes blazed.

"That was too much!" Aref'ja snapped. "Too much!"

"It's just an eye," Fett said callously.

"You *did* ask us to do your dirty work," Jaller added. "Maybe you should do it yourself next time."

Behind them, Fel whimpered and moaned like a dying animal.

"Get out," Aref'ja hissed. "Go back to your... quarters."

Fett nodded and went out of the room without another word. Jaller followed. As they walked fast down the hallway, away from the bloody scene, Jaller's voice rang inside Fett's helmet.

"Why did we do that? He said he could get us an antidote!"

"He did," Fett acknowledged. "And they were listening. They heard that. But they don't care about it anymore, do they?"

"He won't help us after we tore his eye out."

"If we get him off this ship and back to his people, I have a feeling he'll give us anything we want."

"Is that what we're going to do? Are we going to bust him out? And his Jedi wife too?"

"Maybe," Fett acknowledged. He hadn't even thought about Jaina Solo yet. All he knew was that Fel's offer sounded too good to be true, which meant it probably was. However, that still might be better than hanging all his hopes on that scum Lecersen.

"Well, what are we going to do?" Jaller pressed.

"I don't know yet," Fett snapped. "I need to check a few things, make sure that really was a Chiss ship there, and that it really was his sister at the helm."

"And if he was telling the truth?"

Fett remembered the sureness in Fel's eyes and had little doubt that he was. He said, "Then things are going to get *really* interesting."

A normal human might not have been able to read the expression on Aref'ja's face, but Elscol had known the Bothan long enough to tell that he was feeling guilty.

They were in Aref'ja quarters. A dim blue holo shone over the table in front of his sofa. It showed Jagged Fel, lying in the same medical bed he's been tortured on, now unconscious with a small pile of bacta patches over his face. Just an hour earlier, they'd watched on the very same holo as Fett and his partner had ripped Fel's eye from its socket.

Like Myri Antilles, Jagged Fel had come into her life as a strange echo of the past. She knew of his military and political exploits from afar and had once or twice examined his holo for resemblance to his uncle. He had always been a bit of an enigma to her; his allegiances and motivations seemed to

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always be in flux, much like his father's. And yet, despite it all, he'd seemed an honorable man who was actively trying to reform the Empire.

A fat lot of good that had done him.

"He probably doesn't know anything," Arefja said in a low voice. "Nothing that could help us, anyway."

"It's likely," Elscol said coolly.

A part of her found pleasure in Arefja's discomfort. It was the least he deserved for making his pact with Daala and letting her crazed Mandalorians on board. She didn't press him, though. She didn't dig the knife of guilt in, or try pushing him to break the alliance. She knew it was a lesson he'd have to learn for himself.

She just hoped he wouldn't learn it too late. Assuming it wasn't too late already.

"I'm going to see him," Elscol said at last.

Arefja looked at her. "Why?"

She forced a brittle smile. "I think they call it good-cop, bad-cop."

Arefja nodded dully and let her go. Elscol went down the corridor and to the lift. As it carried her to the medical wing she leaned back against the wall, closer her eyes, and tried to find some place of serenity in this storm. Then the lift stopped and the doors opened and she knew there was no easy way out.

As she walked down the hall to Fel's room she was surprised how tired she felt. She'd made a life of riding on highs of restless, angry energy. She'd been fueled by hate, of the Imperials and the Vong, and now she had Daala and her armored thugs right in front of her and she was impotent to strike out against that obvious enemy and instead of making her more restless, more angry, it just made her feel very old and very tired.

When she stepped into Fel's room she walked cautiously along the outer wall, as though she were afraid of what this drugged and crippled man could do to her. Finally, cautiously, she stepped up to the side of his bed. She looked down at that face: pale and dry, wiped clean of blood but still with visible tatters on the lips. The layers of bacta patches over his left eye covered half his face.

Fel's closed eye flickered, opened. Sleepily, it came to rest on her.

"Are you awake?" she asked softly.

A grunt scraped deep in his throat.

"My name is Elscol Loro. I am captain of this vessel." she wanted to apologize for his injury but held her tongue. It would do nothing except betray the weakness she was feeling.

Fel opened his mouth to speak. At first it came out as a wheeze, but then he managed to say, "I know nothing..."

Elscol nodded gravely. "We believe that may be the case."

"Good," Fel grunted. "Hate to lose... other eye."

Amazingly, he still had strength for jokes. Elscol leaned closer to his ravaged face and said, "I flew with your uncle, Mr. Fel. I flew with Rogue Squadron. I left shortly before your father joined, so I'm afraid that I never met him."

Fel closed his eye and whispered, "Guess I'm like him now."

Elscol frowned. "What do you mean?"

"One eye," Fel said. "Runs in... family."

Her father must have been maimed in a similar way. Elscol leaned in closer and lowered her voice so the bugs in the room couldn't hear.

"Mr. Fel," she said, "Your cousin is aboard this vessel."

Fel's eye fluttered open. His lips pursed in a wordless question.

"Myri Antilles is alive," Elscol said. "She is resting comfortably in Deck C7, Room V12."

Fel wheezed, so quietly Elscol could barely hear, "Why... are you..."

Elscol pulled away. She didn't know the answer herself. She turned and walked out of the medical bay, letting the door shut tight behind her.

Chapter 14

Ben Skywalker awoke to nothingness. His eyes were open but there was only black. He tried to move his arms and legs but they were bound. He tried to figure out where he was, and the past came back in pieces.

Ben remembered standing on the bridge of *Celestial*, right next to Commodore Fel, watching the chaos unfold. He remembered the red flash when the Tylonian ship dropped out of hyperspace and immediately slammed into *Justifier*, creating a geyser of flame and superheated metal. He remembered the gold of Wynssa Fel's hair as she turned her back to him, even as he pleaded with her to intervene. He remembered the pain in his palms as he balled his hands into fists, frustrated and impotent as he watched more and more ships drop out of hyperspace to surround the panicked, fractured Trinity fleet.

Aside from that he remembered nothing, except for the brief stinging pain of the stun bolt when it hit him in the back.

"Hey!" he called out in the black. "Hey, I'm awake in here!"

Ben tried to reach out with the Force and sense other people nearby, but he found nothing. They must have put him in a cell, a small dark cell, and bound him by his hands and feet. He tugged at his bonds again and wondered if he should try and pry them off with the Force. Even if he did,

he'd be left wandering in total darkness for a door that would surely be locked.

"Hey!" he called again. "If somebody wants to tell me what the kriff's going on, I'd really appreciate it!"

He got no response, but he hadn't been expecting one, at least not right away. They probably had infrared sensors somewhere in the room to measure his motion, hear rate, and body heat, plus probably some other kind of fancy Chiss technology that he'd never heard of.

He didn't know how long he laid there for, but after five minutes or an hour a disembodied voice sounded in the dark. It was cool and controlled, with the tiniest hint of female softness.

"I apologize for keeping you in this state," Wynssa Fel said.

"Do you really think this is a good idea? The Jedi order isn't going to take too kindly to my kidnapping." Ben tried to keep the anger out of his voice, and the fear. He tried to sound like unflappable and confident, like people thought Jedi always were.

"We had no intention of kidnapping you Jedi Skywalker. We also have no intention of keeping you any longer than necessary."

"Longer than necessary? Well *that's* informative," He tried his best condescending laugh. "I'm guessing we're not with Trinity fleet anymore."

"You guess correctly."

"So what did you do? Side with Daala's people? Or did you cut and run entirely?"

"We performed a strategic withdrawal. My ship was sent here primarily to observe the joint Alliance-Imperial effort and provide key information when necessary."

"What about the people we left behind?" Ben asked. More jumbled memories came back. Jaina had been on *Justifier* when it went down. He hadn't felt her death through the Force, and he was sure he would have, even in the heat of battle. At least, he was *almost* sure.

"We withdrew shortly after *Chimaera* jumped to hyperspace," Wynssa said. "No Trinity ships were damaged or destroyed except for *Justifier*."

"What about my cousin?" Ben's throat was dry and his voice cracked. "Do you know what happened to Jaina?"

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"No, though *Chimaera* sent boarding parties onto *Justifier* so it is possible she was captured. She could have also jettisoned in an escape pod or been killed."

Another memory came back: three fast corvettes, sweeping up a lone shuttle with their tractor beams. "What about your brother? Where is he?"

There was a long, pregnant pause. Finally, she said, "We believe he was taken captive aboard *Phoenix*."

"You're abandoning him? Your own brother?" He couldn't believe anyone, even a hard-case Chiss commo-dore, would simply abandon kin. That was almost *Jacen* levels of ruthlessness.

"We performed a strategic withdrawal to consult with Chiss high command," Wynssa said.

"But... if you left Trinity, and they leave the battle-field... how will you find them?"

"We have our ways, Skywalker," she said, smooth and confident. In truth, he didn't doubt her.

"Listen to me," Ben said, "Don't do this. Don't just walk out. You can't leave your own family in the hands of your enemy."

"There are elements to this situation you do not understand, Skywalker." Her voice was firm, but also defensive. Ben had hit on something, and she was right, he didn't understand, and he probably never would while he was strapped her in the dark talking to a disembodied voice.

"Hey," he asked, "Do you treat all your prisoners like this?"

"Only Jedi."

"So... You get a lot of Jedi then?"

"Very rarely. The last one was ten years ago, and after my brother secured Lowbacca's release, he joined your cousin Jacen on a mission to destroy one of our depots. It resulted in the banishment of my brother and the dis-honor on our family."

Ben winced in the dark. He was definitely striking a nerve, which made him feel vaguely accomplished, but this probably wasn't the nerve he wanted to strike. He said, "Yeah, well, my cousin was a first-rate *sleemo*. Don't blame me for that."

"Then who shall I blame, Skywalker?"

"Listen," Ben said, "We could spend all day talking about where Jacen went wrong. Believe me, I *have* and I never got anywhere satisfying. This is

about *you*. Unless you're a first-rate *sleemo* too, you don't leave your family to be tortured and killed at the hands of your enemy."

He lay in the black, waiting for a response. In the darkness and silence, seconds stretched to hours. Finally, Wynssa said, "I am an officer of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet and I will carry out the orders I am given. I will speak to you again when I have received them."

Ben heard a faint click, like someone putting down a handheld speaker. Then there was silence. He called out, "Hey, can I at least get some water here?"

And as he expected, no answer came.

They stood in the hangar, staring up at the smooth, broad-winged, organic bulk of the Sekotan flyer. Despite the chaos of the past few hours and the terrifyingly uncertain fate of her closest friends, Tahiri Veila's mind had never left this place. She and the Wraiths had worked for days, examining every bit of organic Sekotan technology and Yuuzhan Vong-formed implants, scouring it for information about the renegade fleet or Zonama Sekot. The secrets it might possibly hold still commanded attention despite *Justifier's* destruction and the instant loss of nearly all of Trinity's command staff.

But there was more than that, especially for Tahiri. She'd spent five years on Zonama Sekot, studying its marvels and learning the marvels inside herself as she explored the Yuuzhan Vong memories that had become an unextractable part of her. They'd been challenging years, but looking back she understood they'd been the most satisfying of her life. She'd been at peace; she felt like she'd belonged.

But she'd left Zonama and rejoined the greater galaxy, and everything had gone downhill after that- for herself, for the galaxy, and even for Zonama Sekot. This Vongformed ship, so like the ones she'd known but so different, was the key to unlocking just what had happened to the living planet and the exiles it sheltered.

To use this key, Tahiri had to unlock parts of herself she'd thought long buried, and it was an unsettling experience.

It was unsettling all the more because she had no idea what she'd find once she turned the key. Perhaps Zonama had been destroyed, and the

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warmongering Yuuzhan Vong in the Unknown Regions were all that was left of their race. Maybe Zonama survived in hiding, and she could go back there, but she knew she'd return a far different person than the one who'd left ten years ago. The thought of presenting herself to Sekot as she was now, after all the horrible things she'd done, filled her with shame.

But Yuuzhan Vong said you had to embrace the pain, and Tahiri knew she had to do just that.

She glanced at the taller woman standing next to her. Jesmin Tainer was staring up at the Sekotan ship's cockpit, like she was trying to stare the living ship down. Tahiri reached out with the Force to try and get a feel for her, understand what emotions she must be going through. She found a whirl of anxieties, but at Jesmin's center was a core of hard determination.

"We have to do this now," Tahiri told Jesmin. "Every-thing might depend on it."

"There's so much going on," the other woman said hoarsely. "Voort, Sharr, and most of the others, they're off on some... recon mission, or something, I don't know. They're trying to find Commander Fel, and Jaina Solo, and-"

"I *know*." Tahiri didn't need a reminder that Jaina, Jag, and Ben were all in danger. Her scarred brows wrinkled in consternation. "These are captain's orders."

Jesmin knew what that meant. Captain Antilles had suddenly been thrust into leadership of the whole Trinity fleet, and she wanted to make sure that they retrieved Sekot's location from this ship before it died. Finding Sekot and the Vong was the primary mission; grappling with Daala and Aref'ja was secondary, even if they did have a number of senior personnel as prisoners.

"Sorry," Jesmin swallowed. "It just seems kinda *wrong* to be here when the rest of the Wraiths are off risking their lives."

"They have their work, we have ours," Tahiri said.

She was about to suggest that they get up the ladder and inside the ship when a roar sounded behind them. She turned and saw Huhunna approaching, one long furry arm raised in greeting. Behind her was a Yuuzhan Vong dressed in a baggy black flight suit.

It was Scut, of course. Without the tattoos, ritual scars, or grotesque piercings, he hardly resembled the Yuuzhan Vong warrior from the holo-

vids, but it was still a little off-putting to see him without the masquer he typically wore in public. It wasn't that Tahiri was afraid of Yuuzhan Vong; rather, seeing one on this cold mechanical hangar bay seemed vaguely heretical to her implanted instincts.

"Are you ready to start?" Jesmin asked.

"I'm ready if you are." Scut's eyes lingered on Tahiri and he asked, "Are you?"

"Of course I am," she nodded.

"You say that to meld thoughts with the ship, one has to have a... clear mind..."

Huhunna gave a soft, sympathetic moan. Tahiri said, "My mind is as clear as it's going to get, considering I don't know if my friends are alive or dead."

"Could you... feel anything in the Force?" Jesmin ventured.

"I didn't feel them die. And I think I would have felt that. I *hope* I would have. Jaina and Ben are my..." She trailed off and shook her head before getting the last word out: *family*.

Instead she turned back to the ship. "Come on. The flyer's still dying, even with the energy we're feeding into it. It's getting weaker by the minute."

"Okay," Scut said, "Let's get this over with."

Tahiri went up the ladder first, followed by Jesmin, then Scut, then Huhunna. They crawled along the top spine of the ship, the clambered down into its interior. They followed the long cables that trailed down the hallway toward the cockpit.

When they got to the front of the ship, Tahiri was amazed by all the material scattered across the cockpit floor: hyperspanners, sonic wrenches, reels of energy cable, the shell of a viewscreen, even what looked to be the cannibalized cockpit console from an A-wing.

She knew Sharr and Huhunna had been trying to remove the Yuuzhan Vong control interface from the cockpit and replace it with a mechanical one, but she didn't know they'd gone to this much effort.

Jesmin let out an impressed whistle. "You guys gave it your all."

Huhunna moaned. Despite all their effort, they'd ultimately been forced to quit without making significant progress. As with propulsion and weapons, the Yuuzhan Vong modifications to the ship were too extensive, too thoroughly grafted to the ship's organic neural network. There was no

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way to re-attach a mechanical interface, and that was why Tahiri and Scut were both here. They took places in front of the pilot and co-pilot's consoles, each holding one of those grotesque half-transparent command masks.

"Will it hurt?" Scut asked.

"It was designed for optimal use with Yuuzhan Vong biology," Tahiri said. "It hurt a little with me."

"So it won't hurt Scut?" Jesmin asked.

Tahiri shrugged. "Or it will hurt a lot more. Depends which Yuuzhan Vong were doing the modifications."

"Great," Scut grunted. He held the mask up to his face without putting it on, examining it in the dim light coming through the cockpit. "I was always curious about my people. I always wanted a closer look at what they were capable of."

"Well," Tahiri said, "You're about to get your wish."

"Do not remind me." Scut glanced at Jesmin. "If either of us look like we are in too much pain, use that saber of yours and cut the umbilical cables."

Jesmin rested a hand on the lightsaber at her belt. "What counts as too much pain?"

Tahiri said, "Screams, writhing on the floor, that sort of thing. These things weren't meant to be comfortable."

"Okay." Jesmin swallowed.

"You're going to have to use your own judgment on this."

"You mean use the Force?"

"I mean I trust you."

Jesmin blinked in surprise, like she was unused to those words. She squeezed her saber a little tighter and said, voice dry, "You got it."

Tahiri turned her attention to Scut. While Jesmin was a mix of confusion and resolve in the Force, the Yuuzhan Vong was a pure blank space. Nonetheless, in his eyes she could see emotions much like Jesmin's, yet deeper in every way. Tahiri and Scut were on the edge of a precipice and the only way to find out what was at the bottom was to jump in recklessly. It might doom or save them, but either way they had to know.

They said it all with their eyes. They held gazes for a moment, then Scut nodded and Tahiri nodded back. They put the masks on at the same time.

The dry tissue of the masks scraped uncomfortably on their faces. For a moment it seemed like nothing would happen. Scut made a sound,

something between a grunt and squeal. A second later Tahiri felt it hit her. The synapse-flares of the flyer's dying brain connected with hers and suddenly she was flooded with sensation.

The dying brain had no order to its memories. Tahiri was assaulted by physical sensations: the pain of tearing hull and interior flesh, the scorch of laser blasts, the terrified rush of energy as the living ship knew it was under threat.

Tahiri had communed with living ships before, but none so volatile or pained. She had to wrestle it to submission, commanding its scattered thoughts into some kind of order. It was a struggle, and as the dying ship shared its pain she felt that agony echo through her own body.

She was dimly aware of what was going on outside. Staring through the dim translucency of the mask she saw Scut's shape jerk back, then forward. He clutched the mask to his face but did not attempt to remove it. Tahiri made a choking sound and braced herself against the console with one hand.

After that they went still, both of them. Neither moved and neither made a sound. They simply stood there in the half-light, faces covered in grotesque Yuuzhan Vong masks as their minds joined more deeply with the dying ship's.

Tahiri physical self became an afterthought. Summon-ing mental control imbued by years of Jedi training, she tamed the alien mind that was her mind. She embraced the pain and accepted it, like the Yuuzhan Vong had taught her, and in accepting could command it, and in commanding she could peel back the layers of aggregated pain and see what existed beneath.

What Tahiri found was stunning. Memories of foreign hands and foreign bodies, moving in the ship and changing it, tearing out its initial mechanical implants- the kind Tahiri knew from her five years on Zonama- and replacing them with specially-bred dovin basals and volcanic launchers. Yuuzhan Vong shapers, striving for ancestral purity, had transformed this ship into something it was not meant to be.

Amongst the echo of all those Yuuzhan Vong she felt a fresh presence she instantly knew as Scut's. It was tremulous and confused; unlike a Jedi, he was not used to the melding of minds. She calmed him as best she could and together they probed deeper still.

At the bottom they found stars and stardust, asteroids and planets and moons. The topography of the so-called Unknown Regions was firmly

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mapped in the ship's mind. Even as it lay dying it remembered where it was in deep space; Tahiri could feel the ship and their selves straddling a black gap between stars. And she could feel the dying animal's desperate craving to return to its home.

Tahiri followed that need, taking Scut with her. Their minds seemed to roam across the vast spread of stars and planets, drawn unerringly toward the single place the dying ship most badly wanted to go. And in memory's eye they saw the bright green of the living world. Its warmth seemed to fill even the void of cold space.

Together they burned the surrounding planets and stars in their minds. Once they'd done it, they lingering within the ship's mind for one eternal moment, sharing the knowledge and the satisfaction that they'd gotten what they'd come for.

Then they retreated.

The cramped cockpit resolved around them, still blurred by the tissue of their masks. Tahiri found herself breathing fast. She grabbed her mask with one hand and pulled it off. Her face was shiny with sweat and whatever foul fluid came off the mask, but her eyes were bright and alert.

Scut's hands had tightened on his mask, his fingers dug into the organic material, and a gagging sound escaped his throat. He started tugging at the mask but it would not come off. Jesmin pulled her lightsaber off her belt and held it high but didn't ignite it. Tahiri shook her head and raised a hand for her to wait.

The mask released and fell into Scut's hands. He threw his head back and took in deep, gasping breaths before dropping the mask and staggering backward until he was against the wall.

"*That...*" Scut breathed, "That was... very... strange..."

"What happened?" Jesmin asked. "Did you get anything? Did you find?"

"Give us datapads," Tahiri rasped. "Now."

They'd talked this over before, and Sharr knew exactly what she meant. He took out two datapads, each loaded with the most complete Chiss star maps available. Tahiri took one easily; Scut grabbed his with shaking hands.

Clinging to the memories still emblazoned in their minds, they both scoured the star maps, the listings of stellar types and planetary formations. They overlaid them onto what they'd just received from the ship, and among all the thousands of systems nearby, Tahiri found herself drawn, as though

by the Force itself, to a single planet whose neighbors and planets all matched what she'd seen and felt from the ship.

"Here," Tahiri said, tapping the pad and bringing up a system with a long Chiss astrographer's designation.

"Here," Scut echoed, and held up his own pad.

Tahiri leaned forward to check, secretly fearing their findings wouldn't match and that all their hard probing had been for nothing.

What she saw brought a tired smile her face. She wiped sweat off her forehead and leaned against the console. Scut dropped exhausted to the deck.

"What is it?" Jesmin looked confused between them. "What happened?"

"We have it," Tahiri said. "We have Zonama Sekot."

Syal Antilles stood at the head of the conference table and tried to keep her breath steady. It had been almost ten hours since the attack on *Justifier* and the kidnapping of Jagged Fel. By her body clock, she should have been asleep five hours ago. Instead she had stimulants pulsing in her bloodstream and a thousand worries rattling through her mind. She tried to steady body and mind both as she listened to the reports from the people gathered around her: Voort SaBinring, Tahiri Veila, Mila Pavric, Traest Kre'fey, and the white-haired, craggy-faced Captain Vernedet, ranking Imperial officer in Task Force Trinity.

What they had only added to her anxiety. Vernedet and Pavric passed around datapads containing lists of all the personnel that had been rescued from *Justifier*, as well as a second, mercifully shorter list containing all peoples missing in action. Many of them were dead, surely, but there was no way of knowing who had been killed and who had been taken back to *Chimaera*. At the top of that second list, two names screamed for attention: Fy'lyor and Jaina Solo. Nobody even needed to mention that Jagged Fel was captured and his sister vanished; their absences left a screaming hole in the fleet's chain of command that Syal was hoping desperately to fill, even though she knew herself barely qualified to captain one ship, let alone a fleet.

Veila reported next. She said that she had examined the Sekotan vessel recovered from the debris field and uncovered the coordinates of Zonama

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Sekot's last location, at least according to the ship's memory core. As Veila gave her pronouncement Syal could see Kre'fey's fur ripple and Vernetet intake breath. The prospect of journey's end gave Syal no solace whatsoever. She looked right at Voort and told him to report.

The Gamorrean had his own major news. Wraith Squadron had spent the past ten hours on reconnaissance flights based on the vector on which *Chimaera* had jumped to hyperspace. They had sought the encrypted pulse signal of the homing beacon attached to Jagged Fel's shuttle before his flight as a precaution, and the signal had led them to a nebula of red gases and dust. Voort's own recon flight had surveyed almost twenty ships of mixed design, including *Chimaera* and *Phoenix*, situated in mid-range orbit around the star.

With the reports made and everyone's sabacc cards on the table, all eyes fell to Syal. Their commander. Their leader. The one who was supposed to save them even when she kept failing all the people close to her. She still couldn't believe so much responsibility had fallen on her.

When she looked around the table she tried to hold everyone's gaze except Kre'fey's. She had let down the old admiral again and was afraid of seeing judgment in his violet eyes, or worse, pity.

Finally she said, "The priority for this mission is to recover Zonama Sekot and the Yuuzhan Vong. That was agreed from the beginning, and its importance is paramount. It outweighs any one person... or any group of people."

Syal watched Veila as she said those words. The other woman had lost both her fellow Jedi in the ambush and must have felt bitterly alone, but her expression was guarded, her green eyes as forbidding as the pale Yuuzhan Vong scars on her forehead.

Syal shifted her attention to Voort. "However, the importance of the data the Wraiths have gathered is not to be underestimated. We will not abandon our people to be tortured, interrogated, or killed by Admiral Daala. Therefore, we will be splitting Task Force Trinity into two groups."

She took a deep breath and looked to Pavric. "Captain, your vessels holds over a third of our total complement of starfighters and support craft. I want you to lead the task force to Zonama Sekot. You will take *Mon Dromeda* and *Liberty Star* with you."

The Calibop blinked her small black eyes. She rustled the feathers on her broad wings and said, "Understood, Captain Antilles."

Syal shifted her attention to Vernedet. "Captain, I would also like you to take *Vindicator*, along with your frigates, to Zonama Sekot."

"Agreed," Vernedet nodded. "However, as I understand it, that leaves you with only *Starless* and two gunships to confront Daala and Aref'ja."

"That's right," Syal nodded. "We couldn't outfight her before and we can't now. We don't have the hardware or the manpower. I'm going to try and negotiate."

"Negotiate with *what*, if I may ask?" Krefey spoke up finally. The incredulity in his voice stung.

Syal swallowed. Fel had told her about the Chiss store of Alpha Red in private, just before getting on the shuttle for his ill-fated trip to *Celestial*. The sole vial Jaina Solo stole had been placed in the most secure bio-sealed container on *Starless*. The only ones on the ship who knew about it were herself, Voort, and the two Wraiths who had helped steal it from the Chiss.

"It's classified," Syal said simply. The rest of the table stared at her dumbly, except for Voort, whose small porcine eyes were unreadable to anyone except her. She pressed on. "Commander Fel passed something on to me shortly before his capture. It was, in fact, the reason for the conference that had him secretly flying to *Justifier* in the first place. I'm afraid I cannot divulge his secret at this time."

"But you'll divulge it to Daala and Aref'ja?" Vernedet said skeptically.

It was a stupid plan, desperate and reckless. If the Imperials actually got their hands on Alpha Red the consequences could be disastrous. Syal's hope was to use it as a bartering chip. She would try to coerce Daala to release either Jagged or more likely Jaina and Fy'lyor as a show of good faith, then offer the bio-weapon itself in exchange for the last prisoner.

It wasn't a trade Jagged would approve of; Syal knew that, but she couldn't leave her cousin in Daala's hands either. She had handed the stolen Alpha Red sample to the best bio-techs aboard *Starless*, who were working on a way to render the disease subtly inert, preferable with some time-lapse formula that would only activate after Syal had traded a working sample for Jagged.

But that was hoping for a lot. The best bio-techs in the galaxy probably couldn't sabotage Alpha Red so effectively in so short a time, and the ones

on *Starless*, while competent, were nowhere near the best. Foolishly, they'd never expected to need that kind of specialist on this mission.

Syal looked to Captain Pavric and said, "I want to have the fleet split within five hours. If you don't hear from me within ten hours after that, I want you to convince Zonama Sekot to change location, if it can be safely done."

"Whoa, hold on," Veila said. "We don't even know if Sekot is *there*, not for sure. And even if it is, hyperspace jumps are very dangerous. We have no idea what condition the planet will be in, or if it'll be in any condition to risk a jump. We don't know if the planet will welcome us either. It's been known to repel whole *fleets* before."

"I know. But you have the most experience with that planet out of anyone, Miss Veila, which is why you'll be with Captain Pavric coordinating the fleet."

Veila's jaw hung open, like she wanted to object. It snapped shut, opened again, closed. Finally, she nodded, "I understand. You can count on me, Captain."

"I'm glad," Syal said honestly. She looked to Voort. "I will need to make some preparations before we depart. I'll enlist help from the engineering crew on *Starless*, but I have some special tasks for the Wraiths too."

"We'll do what you need. Reconnaissance?"

"That, and other things," Syal nodded. "I want a StealthX flight on the edge of that nebula, monitoring their transmissions. And decoding them if possible. That's how they were able to get the jump on us."

Voort nodded. "I'll have ships out there in fifteen minutes."

"Thank you." She shifted her attention to Traest Kre'fey. The Bothan's white fur was flat against his skull and the expression on his alien face was unreadable. "Admiral, you can join whatever fleet you wish."

Kre'fey snorted. "I'm no Admiral. Just an old Bothan."

"Still," Syal said softly, "The choice is yours." She didn't know if she wanted the pressure of him looming over her shoulder or not. Trying to negotiate with Daala was going to be hard enough without Kre'fey countermanding her orders and exacerbating her doubts.

The Bothan considered for a pregnant moment before he said, "I will come with you. I may be of use when negotiating with Aref'ja. At least, I *hope* I will be."

"Very good," Syal said. "With that decided, I'd like to call an end to the meeting. Some of you have ships to get to. As I said, I want to break the fleet within five hours. I'll send a detailed plan to all ships within that time. Dismissed."

Vernedet was the first to rise to his feet and leave. Pavric went after him, trailing her feathery wings behind her as she left the room. Veila passed next, and she gave Syal a curt, knowing nod as she left. Kre'fey followed her, but his violet eyes avoided Syal; he seemed to be deep in thought, perhaps about his wayward apprentice.

Finally, that left Syal and Voort alone in the room.

The Gamorrean regarded her with concern in his little eyes. His mechanical voice, surprisingly soothing, asked, "When did you last sleep, Syal?"

"It's been a while." Syal pawed at her eyes and gave a dry laugh. "It's going to be a while yet, too. Thank the Force for stims and adrenaline."

"That's no substitute for sleep."

Syal laughed softly, sadly. "I'm a big girl now, Uncle Piggy. I have to make my own choices."

"Yes. You do."

"You don't approve of my plan. I can tell. I wouldn't either, but it was the only thing I could think of."

"Commander Fel would rather die than let Daala get Alpha Red. You know that, don't you?"

"I do," Syal said defensively. "But it's not going to come to that. Alpha Red is just bait. I swear I won't let Daala have the real thing."

"You have other plans then?"

"I'm working on them," she said, though they were a long way from complete.

"And you want Wraith Squadron's support?"

"Of course."

His broad head nodded. "I assumed you wanted more than just recon flights."

"I do," Syal admitted. She reached up and put rested her small hand on his massive shoulder. "Do you trust me?"

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She stared up at that face, with its broad ugly mouth, its bone-white tusks, its snout pulsing hot breath, and two small eyes that betrayed startlingly human compassion.

"Yes," he said. "I trust you, Syal."

His mechanical voice somehow resonated with honesty and tenderness, and it brought tears to Syal's tired eyes.

"I'm glad someone does," she said. "Thank you, Uncle Piggy. Thank you so much."

Chapter 15

Myri Antilles didn't know how long she spent in her cell after Elscol Loro left her, but it seemed to her to last as long as her entire previous captivity combined. Finally she began to give in to the sense of despair that had been gnawing at her since she'd woken up in *Phoenix's* sick bay. She was finally starting to accept, truly accept, that she was not going to see her parents again, or any of the Wraiths. She would never be able to see Syal smile.

After an eternity of empty hopeless void, Elscol came back. Myri stood straight up, feeling irrationally hopeful and excited. Her spirits fell back down when she saw the look on the old woman's face.

Myri felt chilled and wrapped her arms around her sides. She asked, softly, "What happened?"

Elscol examined her face, as though she was looking for something, maybe shadows of her father or mother. She put her hand in her uniform pocket, then took it out.

Myri asked, "Can we talk freely now?"

Elscol nodded.

"What happened?"

"We have another guest aboard," Elscol said. "We've captured your cousin's shuttle."

She had to have meant Jag. It made sense that he would be on another expedition into the Unknown Regions. He might have even been their leader.

"Was there a fight?" she asked.

"More of a slaughter," Elscol said bitterly. "Daala decided to use an alien ship we captured and ram one of their star destroyers. In the chaos, we captured Fel's shuttle while Daala sent commandos aboard the destroyer. She's holding the ship's captain on her star destroyer, *Chimaera*. Also, Jaina Solo."

Myri had no idea the Jedi were involved in this second mission, and she supposed it was a sign of how seriously the threat was being taken.

"So you have the husband, she has the wife? Was that planned or did it just happen?"

"It was planned," Elscol said. "It was considered... a fair division."

Hope flitted up, unwilling. Maybe Myri could hook up with Jagged somehow, and somehow grab a ship and flee, but flee to where? And what ship? She tried to shove her hopes back down in the black space where they belonged. They'd do her no good here.

"So," she said, mouth dry. "Now what happens? You torture him, try to find out where Zonama Sekot is or whatever?"

"We already did," Elscol said severely.

"Oh," Myri suppressed a shudder. "What did he have to say?"

"Nothing useful."

"Okay, then."

The two women stood on opposite sides of the room, saying nothing, looking at each other but avoiding each other's eyes.

Myri asked, "What are you going to do?"

"Excuse me?" Elscol flinched like she'd been hit.

"What are you going to do?" Myri asked softly. "You're obviously not okay with this. Are you going to keep on fighting with Daala, torturing prisoners?"

"I will do what I joined this fleet to do. I will find and exterminate the Vong," Elscol said, and for the first time this meeting Myri sensed real passion behind her words.

Myri hugged herself tighter. She didn't know how to argue against someone who had that much hate in her. "Well, okay then. That's your

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choice. I can't make it for you, so I don't know why you keep coming to see me."

"Perhaps I thought you needed someone to talk to," she said bitterly.

"Or maybe *you* do," Myri observed. The old woman was clearly a tangle of anger and frustration and Myri didn't know how hard she wanted to push her. She didn't know what would happen if she cracked.

"I will do what I came here to do," Elscol snapped. "I will exterminate the Vong. I will make them pay for *everything* they've done."

"Okay," Myri exhaled. "I believe you. But what happens to me? What happens to Fel? Are you just going to drag us along? Or are you going to get sick of us and flush us out an airlock?"

"No! I would *never* allow that."

"Is it really up to you? It doesn't sound like you're the one calling shots," Myri said, then instantly wondered if she'd pressed too hard.

"This is *my* ship," Elscol stabbed a finger at her chest. "*My* rules, not Daala's."

"Okay, then," Myri said evenly. "I just don't want mom and dad to lose a kid, that's all."

Elscol laughed bitterly. "The universe doesn't care what you want, or even the great Wedge Antilles."

"I don't care about the universe," Myri said. "And you know what? I don't care about the Vong either, or Daala and Aref'ja or whatever. I didn't before this crazy mission started and I don't care now. You know what I wanted, more than anything? I wanted to get on with my sister again. We fought a lot as kids, and then we grew up, and things kinda got better, but then the war happened and Tiom died and everything bright in Syal died out too. Now she acts so *old*, so grim... Kark your revenge quest. I just want to see Syal smile again. That's all."

She realized what a rant she'd gone on, how she'd let anger and frustration get the better of her. Myri was disappointed in herself but Elscol watched without expression or judgment.

The younger woman sighed and said pleadingly, "I just want to see my family again. Can you understand that? *Family*?"

Elscol stared down at her boots. A veil of gray hair fell over her face, hiding it.

"No, you probably don't," Myri whispered. "Like you've told me, you've been fighting all your life. Imps, Vong, whatever. Probably never had time to settle down."

"I did," Elscol's voice choked. "Once. I did."

Myri went very, very still. She waited for Elscol to say something, to pick her head up, but she did not.

"What happened?" she whispered.

"After the war with the Empire ended, I settled down. I married. I had a son." The old woman's face was still hidden from view but her shoulders shook, just a tiny bit. "I had a husband and a son and for a few brief, shining years I thought I could be a normal person instead of a killer. But the Vong came and they died and I will *never* forgive them."

Elscol picked her head up, finally. Her face was twisted in a scowl and her eyes blazed with bitter hatred. She said, "They took everything from me. *Everything*. What I am is what they made me, and I will never *ever* let it go."

In the face of such wrath Myri didn't know what to say. She looked away, stumbled for words. All she could come up with was, "That's no reason for somebody else to lose their son. Or daughter."

She didn't see Elscol spin on her heel and walk out of the room. She just stared at the carpet as she heard the door hiss open and hiss shut. Then she was alone again, trapped in her comfortable cage. Somehow she didn't think she'd see Elscol again.

Myri sat back down on her bed. She rested her elbows on her knees and twined her fingers together. She watched the door like she expected it to open. Not right away, and not with Elscol on the other side, but some- time soon.

Sometime soon, something big was going to happen. She just wasn't sure what.

When they returned to her cell, Jaina remained seated on the bunk and watched them with an unspoken dread.

It was the lack of the Force that left her truly helpless. Were it for not for the ysalamiri, she could at least reach out and try to touch Venku and Gotab, or be touched by them, but instead they were faceless and terrifying behind

their battered T-visor masks. She had felt them in the Force once, and they had felt her, and now that old bond felt irrevocably shattered.

She was unprepared when Venku flipped the switch on the wall and turned off the force field separating her cell from the rest of the room. She stared at them, confused, before she started to rise. Then Gotab tossed something in her lap, a small metal disc that hit her in the gut and knocked her back onto the bunk. Venku flipped the switch again, and the barrier hummed back on.

"What is this?" Jaina asked, flipping it in her hands.

"A holo-projector," Venku said. "The switch is on the side. Turn it on."

A blue image sprung on in front of her. It looked like a medical bed, with someone strapped down and his arms spread in a cruciform position. A Mandalorian in full armor stood on either side. Ice filled Jaina's stomach as she realized that her husband was the man strapped on the bed, and though the image had no color, she could tell by his posture and size that the Mandalorian on Jag's left was Boba Fett.

She didn't say a word as she watched the recording. Neither did Venku or Gotab. Jaina stared, hypnotized, lost in horror and helplessness as her husband writhed in agony on the torture bed. The other Mandalorian sent shocks through his body, burned his hand, broke his fingers, and all the while, between tortured, cries Jag insisted he knew nothing.

Then Fett leaned in close, bowing his helmet over Jagged's face, and they whispered something in tones so low Jaina could only make out scant words. Something about Lecersen, and Chiss and Wyn and...

Then Fett said, "Jaller, take out his eye."

Even his partner seemed stunned. "*Mand'alor*, I—"

"Do it!" Fett barked.

A tiny knife sprung from Jaller's wrist. Jaina saw, actually *saw*, the tiny blue-flickering ball of her husband's left eye as it was gouged from his skull. It arced through the air for one brief second before smashing down on the hard floor. Jagged's static-filled screams filled the cell. Jaina couldn't take any more. She hurled the holo-projector into the force-field, where it sparked and smoked and finally clattered to the floor.

Her breaths were deep gasps and tears ran down her face. She had never felt so helpless, not during the Vong War, not even when Jacen was falling

to the dark. Without her friends, without the Force, she was nothing. She couldn't even save the man she loved most in the universe.

"That was about the end of it," Venku said at last.

Jaina tried to wipe the tears off her face. "I'll kill him. I'll kill Fett, I swear it..."

"Not very Jedi-like," Gotab observed, his tone neutral. "Your husband is still alive and well, minus one eye and a few damaged limbs."

"What do you want from me!?" Jaina screamed. "I can't do *anything*! Do you bring this just to hurt me, to?"

"It was Daala's idea," Venku said. He almost sounded apologetic.

"And you take your orders from her now," Jaina snarled. "Because you *think* she *might* help you get home again... And you'll do what she asks, no matter what..."

"We didn't torture him. That was Fett."

"But you would have, right? If you'd been told to?"

After a long moment, Venku nodded.

"I hate you," Jaina choked. The tears didn't stop coming. She closed her eyes but all she saw was that pixelated tiny ball of blue-white, Jagged's eye, flying through the air. "Get out. Get out! Get out! *Get out!*"

When she opened her eyes, wiped them dry, they were still standing there. They were different now: their helmets were off and cradled in their arms. She saw sympathy in Gotab's eyes; they were like dark wells in his lined, tired face. Venku, rugged and gray but not yet ancient, took a step closer.

"What do you want?" Jaina hissed. "You've hurt me enough today."

Venku stepped close to the force field and she tried to focus on his face. She was surprised to find, of all things, curiosity there.

"What do you *want*?" she repeated.

Softly, Venku said, "The Jedi *have* changed, haven't they, *Bard'ika*?"

"Perhaps," Gotab allowed.

"Changed? What do you mean, changed?"

"You love," Gotab said.

"Yes," Jaina scowled. "Of course I do. I love my husband, my parents, my friends, my-"

She stopped. She was going to say that she still loved her brothers.

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Venku sighed. "My mother was a Jedi. Her name was Etain and she fell in love with a clone named Darman."

"I know about this," Jaina said. His attempt to create sympathy somehow made things worse.

"She carried me in secret and birthed me in secret. She didn't even tell my father that I was his child until after I was born."

Jaina's eyes flicked over to Gotab. The old man caught her gaze and nodded sadly. "Etain was terrified of the Jedi Order. She knew they would take her child and punish her for love."

"That was a long time ago," Jaina insisted. "I don't deserve to be punished for that. The Jedi have changed."

"Really? They're still overthrowing governments and getting millions killed in their feuds with the Sith," Gotab said bitterly. Jaina didn't argue his point. She didn't have the will or the strength. She didn't even know if he was wrong any more.

She sighed deeply and looked back at Venku. "What happened to your mother would not happen today. Jedi can love, have children, do what they want with their lives."

"Family," Venku said. "There's nothing more important than that. Not even your *shabla* Force."

"And you'll torture and kill for your *family*," Jaina said bitterly.

Venku nodded. "Yes. I would."

"Then get off your *kriffing* moral high horse," Jaina snarled. All her welled-up anger was starting to overflow. "You know who you sound like? *Jacen*. He tortured Fett's daughter to death, and *why*? Because he wanted to make the galaxy safe for his little daughter. You're no better than him."

"We fight to protect ourselves," Gotab said. "We don't slaughter half the galaxy until they agree with our politics. That's more Jedi territory."

"You're still the same!" Jaina slammed a balled fist into her thigh. The pain felt good. "Don't you *dare* look down on me! Don't you *dare*..."

Her words caught in her throat. She choked and buried her face in her hands. She kept herself from sobbing openly; she had that much strength left.

When she raised head she stared at Gotab and Veku with red, wet, angry eyes. "You have no right to lecture me about family or taking care of your

own. I put my lightsaber through my twin brother's *chest*. You two *told* me to do it."

"We didn't make you do anything," Gotab said softly.

"I didn't say that!" Jaina snapped. "I did it! I killed Jacen and I don't regret it! I did what I had to! I... I..."

The words caught in her throat again. She wiped the drying tears from her eyes and stared down at her knees.

Venku said, "You do regret it."

"I regret *having* to do it," Jaina said. She'd gone through it in her head time and time again for four years and that was what she always told herself. The Jacen she stabbed through with her saber was a monster, a mad strill, deranged by his own pain. Her brother, the twin brother who had been half of her life for so many years, was already dead.

"What do you regret?" asked Venku.

She knew. She knew but she'd never said it out loud, even to Jagged, even to Uncle Luke and her parents, but she found it bursting through her lips now, because she was all alone in the night and she knew she might not have a chance to tell any being ever again.

And because, just maybe, these two killers might understand.

She swallowed, wiped her eyes. Still staring at her knees she explained in a creaking voice, "I should have never let him fall. I was his *twin sister*. He was me and I was him... I could always feel him in the Force *always*. I look back and I think..."

"When he was captured by the Vong, I gave up on him. I thought I felt him die in the Force and I tried to forget about him, about Anakin, and just keep fighting, because that was all there was left to do. And when he came back... I didn't know what to do. I couldn't believe he was real. So I kept shutting him out. He'd changed- he'd been tortured, traumatized, but he was still *strong*, and I knew he was sad to see what I'd turned into. How distant I'd become."

She took a deep, deep breath. "It was better, by the end of the war. But then he went on his journey to find other Force-users. I didn't see him for almost five years. And when he came back..."

Her hands balled into angry fists. She fought the urge to pound her own thighs, though she knew the pain would feel good. "When he came back something had changed, *really* changed. I didn't know what, or why, until

after he... until after I killed him. But I didn't even *try* to connect. I was weak. I was caught up with the Killiks. I was a Joiner. I was too busy with their Hive to think about what was going on with Jacen. When he tricked us into bombing that Chiss colony, I was so angry. I hated him for it. I closed him off for good and didn't try to reach out. I *should* have. He was my brother and I just... let him go, right when I could have turned him around."

Suddenly her words stopped. She had nothing left to say. After an eternity of staring at her white knuckles she dared to look up at Venku and Gotab. They were standing in the same places. Their old faces looked very, very sad. Neither of them said a thing, and neither of them looked away.

"I failed him," she said. "He was my brother and I failed him. And I can never fix that. I can never help him. All I could do was kill him. And I have to live with that. For the rest of my life."

She had no idea what she expected them to say. She had no idea why she had even poured her heart out to these people, laid her suffering bare, aside from the fact that she might never have a chance to confess to anyone again.

They felt her pain, maybe knew some of it themselves. She could see it in their faces, especially Gotab's. She realized he must have loved Etain in his own way, and like Jaina, he had failed to save the one he loved.

But they were Mandalorians, fighting for their clan, and Jaina was not part of their clan. She was *aruetyc*, outsider, and always would be. She knew when the time came, they would show her no mercy.

Venku stepped away from the force field without a word. He and Gotab moved for the door.

"Wait!" Jaina's voice cracked as she raised it.

They turned in unison.

"What happened?" she asked. "What happened to Etain and Darman?"

"My mother was killed in Order 66," Venku said. "I was too young to remember her. All I have are... feelings. Shadows."

Jaina nodded. She had expected that much. "I'm sorry."

"She died defending clones from a Jedi," Gotab said. She could hear the pain of failure in his voice, the kind that would never go away, even after sixty years.

"What about Darman?" Jaina asked, bracing herself for another dose of someone else's pain.

Venku hesitated. Gotab said, "He was left behind on Coruscant when most of us deserted to Mandalore. He *wanted* to stay. He wanted to help the Empire hurt the Jedi."

"But his wife—"

"Etain was no Jedi," Gotab said. "At least, that's what Darman thought."

Jaina shifted her eyes to Venku, but the man had nothing to add about his father.

"*Kal'buir* was actually helping a few Jedi escape the Empire at the time," Gotab explained. "Darman was furious. He was going to expose our whole operation, just to have his revenge for Etain."

"What happened?" Jaina asked. She could see the answer in Gotab's sad, dark eyes.

"Darman betrayed us. He got his own *vode* killed and was ready to do it again. We had no choice. We had to slot him. It was the only way to keep him from bringing the Empire down on Mandalore. Niner did it, quick and merciful, but he was never the same after that. Neither was *Kal'buir*."

Jaina felt a fresh tear spill down her cheek. "Oh, *Kad'ika*, I am so, so sorry..."

"My *buir* made his own fate," Venku said at least. "There's no way to save him. No way to redeem him. You just have to live with the pain. For the rest of your life."

He took his helmet in both hands and lowered it over his face, ending the conversation. So did Gotab. They stared at her for one long moment through the black visors of their helmets. Then they turned and left the room, leaving Jaina alone once again with helplessness and pain.

Fy'lyor did a lot of thinking. She had plenty of time for it. She laid on her bunk for hours, staring up at the blank ceiling, listening to the dull hum of her cell's force field and the distant roar of the engines, muffled to nearly nothing.

Chimaera was an old ship, maybe twice as old as Fy'lyor, but she continued to run smoothly. There was something impressive about that, and there was something impressive about Daala for being able to do the running with an entirely volunteer crew. Certainly, her audacity in stealing the thing was to be respected. By commandeering the most famous ship in

the Empire, she plainly stated her intentions of return it to its former strength and glory, no matter who or what stood in her way.

Growing up, she had always admired that about Daala. She was by no means a by-the-book soldier. From a technical standpoint, the kind they taught at the Academy, many of her actual battles had been poorly executed. Her fighting style was rash and impulsive, and it usually resulted either in total victory or total defeat. At the same time, she knew how to inspire those under her command and to command respect from those who would not grant it to a young woman who'd supposedly climbed to her rank from under Grand Moff Tarkin's bedsheets.

Fy'lyor still couldn't believe what Daala was offering. She also couldn't believe she was still considering it.

By all rights she should hate Daala for what she did, for the lives she took in her brutal surprise attack on *Justifier*. A large part of her *did* hate Daala for it. At the same time, she had to admire what an efficient strike it had been. With virtually no loss to her own forces, without even firing her turbolasers, she had cut off the head of the enemy fleet. She was welding together her own unlikely union of Alliance and Imperial vessels and crews in a mirror of Trinity's own. At this point, she stood a much better chance of destroying the Yuuzhan Vong than Trinity's remnants did of stopping the war.

Fy'lyor was lost in a mental maelstrom of conflicting hate and admiration when Daala returned. Lost in her reverie, she didn't even notice until the old woman stood right in front of the force-barrier and loudly cleared her throat.

Fy'lyor nimbly jumped off the bed. She stood rod-straight in front of Daala and almost snapped a salute, but instead kept her hands flat at her sides and met her in the eye.

"Did I disturb you?" Daala asked.

"No," Fy'lyor said. She had to stop herself from saying *sir* or *ma'am*. "I was merely thinking."

"There is nothing *mere* about thoughts, Lieutenant Colonel. They're quite important." Daala smiled a little. It made her look like a hungry Trandoshan. "Were you perhaps thinking about my offer?"

"I was," Fy'lyor said.

"And have your thoughts changed since we last spoke?"

Hatred warred with admiration, yes, but Fy'lyor still remembered her duty as an officer. She shook her head from side to side. "I'm sorry, but no. I was given my orders by Head of State Reige himself. I can't counter-mand them."

"I see. And did you, by chance, vote for Reige during that election Fel set up?"

"I did."

In the beginning she had, in fact, been torn between Daala and Fel, but then Fel had bombarded Daala's campaign facility and illegal research station on Hagamoor-3. After that Pellaeon's protege, inexperienced though he was, seemed the only untainted candidate. In truth, she hadn't been enthusiastic about any of them, or the vote itself. She wondered if citizens of the Alliance had to live with that lingering dissatisfaction with democracy.

"I'm glad you respect law and order, and the chain of command," Daala said. "However, you must also consider the greater good."

"Do you expect me to believe that genocide of the Yuuzhan Vong is in everyone's best interest?" Fy'lyor raised an eyebrow. "Or is it just in *yours*?"

Daala put on that hungry-Trandoshan smile again. She reached into the pocket of her uniform and took out a small portable holo-transmitter.

"Before we left Imperial Space," Daala said, "I sent certain recordings to news outlets in both the Empire and the Alliance. I offered positive proof, for all to see, that the Yuuzhan Vong had returned, and were on the warpath. Would you like to see Head of State Reige's reaction to all this?"

Fy'lyor swallowed, nodded.

The holo-projector flickered on. A miniature image of Reige however in front of her. He was standing at some podium and speaking, probably to the press. He was saying, "I categorically deny that we have seen any traces of the Yuuzhan Vong. Despite our proximity to the Unknown Regions, I assure you all that the Empire is as safe and strong as it has ever been."

"No, I have not spoken to Alliance Chief of State Dorvan about the matter at this time. He may know more about this supposed Yuuzhan Vong manifestation, but until he does, or until someone released credible, detailed evidence about this alleged enemy fleet,

"Yes, I assure you, we will guard our borders carefully. Those of us who remember the last war with the Yuuzhan Vong will know the importance

of always staying on guard, and always assuming safety as our highest priority."

The holo flickered off as abruptly as it had come on. Daala put the projected back in her pocket and looked at Fy'lyor expectantly.

The Twi'lek said, "Was I supposed to feel betrayed by that? Of *course* that's what he told the press. He wants to prevent a panic."

"There already *is* a panic. Riots have been reported on dozens of Alliance worlds, especially those that suffered heavily during the *last* Vong War. What I saw there was man in grave denial of the seriousness of this threat."

"I saw a man trying to calm his people."

"There is no use being calm when the monster is on your doorstep. Lieutenant Colonel, I believe you, like Reige, still fail to appreciate the gravity of the situation. Perhaps it is because you were too young to fight in the last war."

"I didn't fight, but I remember it. I remember the shock when Coruscant fell, and Bastion, I remember the refugees that flooded the Empire." She remembered the squalor and misery on so many faces, and how much she wanted to put on a uniform and fight the brutes so that nobody would ever fall victim to such madness again.

Maybe Daala saw it in her eyes. Maybe Fy'lyor was losing her nerve and seeing things in Daala that were not there. She wasn't sure of anything anymore.

"Tell me, Lieutenant Colonel," she said smoothly, "What is more important? Keeping your people *calm*, or keeping them *safe*?"

Safe was the obvious answer, but she didn't want to give Daala the satisfaction of hearing it aloud.

"Pellaeon would be sad to see his protege now," Daala shook her head sadly. "Reige is following through on Fel's foolish decision to add democracy to the Empire. Any fool can look at the Alliance and see where that democracy gets you: endless squabbling, riots, coups, civil wars. And let us not even *begin* to talk about the incredible ineptitude that let the Yuuzhan Vong trounce the New Republic last time."

She leaned in so close her nose almost touched the force-barrier. "And now, Fel and Reige want to *emulate* that! Pellaeon would shake his fist in anger. He under-stood that a strong, wise ruler is needed to keep the people in line: the citizens, the military, and *especially* the bloated old pigs in moff's

uniforms, the ones dead-set on keeping people like *us* from fixing the Empire, making it safer, stronger, more equal for everyone."

It was a strong sales pitch. Fy'lyor knew it was a sales pitch but she couldn't help feeling moved. Natasi Daala was many things, but nobody had ever claimed she was two-faced or insincere. If anything, she was *too* honest. That was what Fy'lyor had admired about her growing up.

"Ask yourself this, Lieutenant Colonel. It is one, simple question that should decide your course of action from here on. Do you want the Empire to survive? Because if you do not, then by all means, throw in with Reige, play democrat and peacemaker with the Force-wizards while the Vong bring death and destruction to the galaxy one more time.

"If you *do* want the Empire to survive, if you want it to remain strong and unified, then you must save it from Fel, Reige, and their misguided idealism. Together we must smash the Vong, and then we must return as heroes and regain our rightful place as leaders of the Galactic Empire. Only then can we build a society that is unified and just."

Her rhetoric was soaring, her pleas sincere. Fy'lyor had to cling to something to keep from being pulled in, and that something was the smoldering corpse of her prized *Justifier*.

Her voice shook as she said, "I cannot ally with the woman who killed my crew."

Daala drew back and flexed her shoulders in a wide shrug. "I understand you have strong personal feelings. I was hoping you could put those aside and act in the best interests of the whole galaxy."

"You only act in the interest of *yourself*," Fy'lyor said. She did not know why, but thin tears ran down the red skin of her cheeks.

Daala shook her head sadly. "The only thing I have ever done is fought for what I believe in. It is the only way to live life honorably." She turned for the exit, but paused at the door and looked over her shoulder. She held Fy'lyor's eyes and said, "I will give you one more chance, and it will be the last one. Make your decision by then."

Then Daala stepped outside.

Fy'lyor fell onto the bed. Her hands were shaking even as she tried to wipe the tears from her eyes. She knew that everything in her entire life- all the ambition, the striving, the paranoia, the thrill of success, everything- had

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been leading to this choice. She knew what she had to do, and half of her hated herself for it.

The other half was calm, steady, content, because she knew what had to be done.

To the crew of *Phoenix*, the four Mandalorian warriors were like statues formed of burnished metal. They stood unmoving: Boba Fett and Dinua Jeban on opposite corners of the bridge, Jaller and Bess Skirata on the main hangar deck. All stood with rifles resting casually at their sides, mirror-black visors turned outward as though they were casually watching the goings-on of a nervous crew.

Inside their helmets, it was a different story.

"It's been verified," Dinua's voice reverberated in Boba Fett's helmet. "I went over the logs from Lecersen's spy ship. *Mer'ika* has it all decrypted. Fel was definitely communicating with his sister aboard the Chiss vessel."

"We don't know for sure that the Chiss can do this," Bess warned. Though she stood half a kilometer away it sounded like she was speaking clearly in Fett's ear.

"We don't know Lecersen can either," Jaller insisted. "But the Chiss are the best bio-engineers in the galaxy, bar none."

"That's what the rumors are," Bess sounded skeptical. "But there's a lot of rumors about the Chiss and they can't all be true."

"I agree," Dinua said. "Right now we have a contract with Lecersen and Daala. That's the safe bet."

"Those *chakaare* are never going to be a safe bet," Jaller said.

"You know what they say about one in hand, Skirata."

"You're not the one exiled from your home," Jaller reminded her.

"No," said Dinua, "But I left two children behind on Mandalore because I wanted to help the *Mand'alor* return to his people. I'm in this as much as you, and I don't think it's worth the risk."

"Don't talk to me about children," Jaller snapped. "I lost two sons when the nanovirus first-"

"Calm down, both of you," Bess insisted. "This isn't helping."

Two heavy sighs crackled in Fett's ear. When it was clear neither Dinua nor Jaller had anything else to interject, Bess added, "Even *if* the Chiss can solve our problem, we still don't know if we can trust Jagged Fel."

"He has a reputation for honor," Dinua admitted.

"What about his sister? Will *she* honor his honor?"

"If she's any sister worth a damn she will," Jaller grunted.

A sullen pause lingered on the comm. Eventually Dinua said, "Any input, *Mand'ador*? You have the final say."

The objections Dinua and Bess were raising were good ones, but there were others besides. Fett said, "We made a contract with Daala. I don't like breaking contracts." People said he was a scoundrel with no sense of honor, but it wasn't true.

"This is more important than a *contract*," Jaller insisted. "This is even bigger than our clan. The future of the entire *Mando'ade* could depend on this."

"Don't give me Venku's *di'kutla* patriotism," Fett said. "If we betray Daala, we'll have made an enemy."

"Listen, *Mand'ador*," Jaller said it sharply, almost mocking, "We know you like the old hawk-bat. But this is bigger than her. You have to make a choice."

"Don't remind me what my duty is," Fett snapped. "You're right about one thing. This is my decision to make, as *Mand'ador*. And all three of you are going to obey it, understood?"

"We understand," Dinua said. Loyal to the last, that one.

Bess and Jaller gave their own assent a moment later. Fett said, "Wait where you are, all of you. I need to go have a chat with Daala."

To their credit, none of them warned him not to tip Daala off. He turned and walked straight off the bridge, leaving Dinua behind to continue her statue act.

He went straight to the rudimentary living quarters their hosts had provided them. The twin bunks and small locker room were no better than what typical grunt soldiers received, but still better than Mandos expected.

The important thing about the room was its comm system. It was plugged directly into *Phoenix's* bridge communications array, and it had taken Bess a few hours to hook it up with the portable encryption device they had brought over from *Chimaera*. The end result, however, was that

Fett could re-route communications through a passive auxiliary channel and make calls to other ships in the fleet without Loro or Aref'ja being aware.

Therefore, two minutes after locking the door and jamming the audio bugs placed under the bunks, Fett was facing a blue quarter-size holo-image of Admiral Daala.

"Greetings, Fett," she gave him a tight smile. "I didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

Fett had the urge to take his helmet off. He usually spoke to Daala face-to-face and she might think it was unusual for him to keep it on. At the same time, he didn't want anything to show on his face. One downside of spending most of your adult life with your head inside a tin can was that you never got used to controlling your facial expressions. He could *try* to hide things from Daala, but if anyone could see through his awkward attempts at subterfuge it would be her.

So he kept the helmet on.

Fett asked, "How are your prisoners doing?"

"I think I'm making progress."

"Any new information? Something you might not want shared?"

Daala chuckled. "Come now, Fett, I'm not going to keep secrets from our trusted allies. Not without good cause, anyway. I am, however, making good progress with Lieutenant Colonel Fy'lyor. I believe she could be a great asset to us."

Fett didn't know much about *Justifier's* captain, but Daala had clearly taken a shine to her, most likely because she saw herself in the young Twi'lek woman. He wondered if that was how a woman like Daala found a sense of comradeship, of home; not through blood, but through like minds and attitudes. It would explain why the two of them got along so well.

"What about Solo?" he asked.

"She's seen the work you did on her husband. It had quite an effect."

He didn't want to make an enemy of Jaina Solo, not if he didn't absolutely have to. She would be a deadly enemy, and what's more, he had to admit he liked the girl. She might have been a Jedi, but she had enough of her father's feistiness to make her admirable.

"You showed her the holo?" he asked.

"I actually let two of your people do that."

"Which two?" he asked, though he already knew.

"The two old ones with lightsabers dangling from their belts. I assume there's a story there."

"There is."

"Anything I should be worried about?" Daala raised an eyebrow.

"They'll follow orders," Fett said. He didn't think it was a lie. "They want to go home. Anything else is secondary for them. They certainly have no love for Jedi."

"Understandable," Daala nodded. "And how is Mr. Fel recovering from your... mmm... enthusiasm?"

"Still in sick bay, though his condition's improving."

"Arefja did not seem eager to have you work on him again."

"No," Fett admitted. "I don't think he is. Admiral, may I ask what you plan to do with the prisoners?"

"No need to be so formal, Fett. But to be honest, I haven't decided their fates. It's entirely possible they're telling the truth, that they're fumbling alone in the night just as we are. However, we did not capture them in order to interrogate, we captured them in order to throw the enemy fleet in chaos, and I think we've succeeded."

"Do you know that for sure?"

"We haven't been attacked yet, have we? No, I expect their forces to disintegrate without a strong leader to hold them together. There's a lesson there, Fett."

He didn't have to ask what it was. Daala could be many things, but she was rarely subtle.

"Are the Skiratas giving you trouble?" he asked. "I told Carid to beat the *osik* out of anyone who did."

Daala shook her head. "Your men have been on their best behavior, even the old clones. They seem to listen to the one with the colorful armor, Venku."

"They respect him more than me." He found it stung a little to admit that and he wasn't sure why. He didn't even *like* the Skiratas. They embodied everything clannish and hostile that he hated about Mandalorian culture.

Daala raised an eyebrow. "Thinking of handing over your crown, *Mand'alor*?"

"Even if I wanted to, they wouldn't let me have it. *Kad'ika*- Venku- thinks I should be leader. He doesn't even *like* me, but he thinks I should lead."

BOOK 2: REVENGE

"You have an interesting family, Fett."

It was truer true than she could possibly know, and Daala knew more about him than most beings. He felt a spike of something, maybe curiosity, and said, "Enough about my family. What about your son?"

Even over the grainy blue holo he could see the surprise on her face. She blinked twice, then said, "I haven't seen him in, oh, four years."

Four years was nothing. He hadn't seen his own daughter in decades, and when he'd finally caught up with her she'd been in a body bag. He'd failed his daughter and he'd failed the memory of his father, and he knew he'd live with that pain the rest of his life.

At least he had one thing: the chance to make amends with Mirta, the only real family he had left.

"Does he take after you?" Fett asked. He was glad Daala couldn't see his face right now.

"Oh, no. If anything he takes after Liegeus. He's a farmer. Wants no part of my crazy life." She shook her head and allowed a sad smile. "I don't think we'll ever see each other again."

"You could try-"

"Trying is pointless," Daala said. "He is what he is and I am what I am. We're all too old to change."

All, she said. Fett was old, yes, and change was very hard, but for a few brief months, before he was exiled from his home and Mirta swore she never wanted to see him again, he'd really felt like he was changing, like he was leaving behind a lifetime of cold loneliness and becoming part of... something. A family, a clan, a nation, whatever Mirta was.

Maybe Daala was right. Maybe he'd never change. Or maybe his close brush with death had made him aware how much he needed to change.

But Daala would never change. She would always be Daala, nothing more, nothing less. And it hurt him to know he was about to betray her.

"Are you getting sentimental, Fett?" she asked. Her tone was coy, teasing, but he felt honest concern beneath.

Oh, he was glad she couldn't see his face. He took a moment to make sure his voice wouldn't crack, then said, "Just curious. Didn't mean to pry."

"Don't worry about it," Daala smiled. "Even if we don't get anything from the prisoners, I'm still confident this mission will be a success."

"Are you now?"

"Call it a hunch. A feeling that we're both about to get what we want."

"I'll trust your optimism, then. Anything else?"

"You called me, Fett. Is there?"

"Nothing. Just wanted to have a private chat, without my hosts peeking over my shoulder."

"Understood. Stand by for further instructions. I'll let you know if anything changes. Daala, out."

Her image immediately shrunk to nothing. Fett stood in front of the deactivated holo-emitter for what seemed like forever. Then he turned, walked down the hall, and headed for the medical wing.

As he approached the room where Fel was still kept captive, he saw two guards standing outside the door. Maybe they'd have orders not to let him in, but he figured he could bluff his way past them long enough for a few crucial words with Fel.

He was getting a plan together when the door slid open and Captain Loro walked out. The woman stopped in her tracks the moment she saw him. Her expression grew even more severe than usual, which was no small feat.

He decided to take the initiative. "How's the prisoner, Captain?"

"He's recovering," she said icily. "Why are you here?"

"I wanted to see him."

"I think you've seen him enough."

"Admiral Daala wants an exact report of the damage he's sustained. I think she wants to micromanage his next session."

He'd more or less revealed that he was communicating with Daala in a way that bypassed their main communications system, but if Loro was worth anything as a captain she'd have expected that anyway.

"Don't worry," Fett said, "She doesn't want him dead. She also wanted me to pass on a message."

"What kind of message?"

"She wanted him to hear about how his wife was doing. So I'll tell him."

Loro scowled. "Daala is a cruel woman."

"Yes, but she knows how to get results."

She could take that as a slight, or not. He didn't care so long as she moved aside. It struck him that she was acting very protective of the prisoner, moreso than you'd expect from a ship's captain. From what he'd seen before,

Loro didn't seem like a woman who flinched at wet-work, and he wondered what else was at play.

"May I talk to him?" Fett asked as politely as possible.

Reluctantly, Loro nodded. "You have five minutes."

"I'll be out in three," Fett promised, and walked through the door.

Fel was still strapped with his arms out on the bed. They'd taken the band off his forehead, so at least he could pick his head up and glare at Fett with his remaining eye. The entire left half of his face was a mess of bandages, as was his right forearm. His left hand was wrapped in a cast that cradled his broken fingers. His legs, at least, were good, but they probably had him on pain medication that would make him a hassle to move.

"You," Fel rasped. The hatred in his voice was fierce and well-earned. Fett tried not to take it personally.

"I'll be quick," Fett said. He pressed the switch of the jammer on his wrist armor, killing the audio feed from the holo-camera sitting in the upper-left corner of the room. He didn't want to give himself away by killing the camera entirely, so he placed himself where his back faced the camera and obscured Fel's face.

"You want the other eye?" Fel strained against his bonds.

"I want that antidote for the nanovirus. Was that a serious offer?"

"I made it before you maimed me. What makes you think it still stands?"

He didn't have time for this. "Do you want off this ship or not?"

Fel took visible effort to control his anger. "Can you get Jaina and Fy'lor off *Chimaera*?"

"Most of my people are over there, plus our *besulii'ke* fighters. That will be child's play. I have the full specs on the virus from Lecersen's lab on Hagmoor-3. Can you get me an antidote?"

"The Chiss helped create that virus. If they can't do it, no one can."

"Will they get me an antidote in exchange for you?"

"Yes," Fel insisted. "I will make sure of it. You have my word."

"Good," Fett said. "We'll be back in fifteen minutes. Be ready."

"Wait-" Fel said as he turned to go.

Fett turned back to face him, "Make it quick."

"My pilots," he said, "I have two of them, Cell Block... B, I think."

The good commander, always looking out for his men. Admirable, but a pain in the *shebs*. They hadn't been tortured, so at least they could help out in a firefight.

"Okay, consider it done."

He turned, but Fel called "Wait!" again. Fett turned back, impatient. The captive said, "My cousin is on this ship."

"What?" He was starting to rethink this deal.

"Deck C7... Room V12. Myri Antilles."

"I only have four people on this ship. You're asking a lot."

"We all go, or nobody goes," Fel said.

Two to get Fel, one for the pilots, one for Antilles. He ran over a mental map of the ship. It would be doable if Antilles and the pilots were in condition to move. If not, he'd leave them behind and tell Fel they died during escape.

"Twenty minutes," Fett said. "Be ready."

He turned and walked out of the room. Loro was gone, thankfully, though as he headed for the turbolift he wondered who had told Fel about the Antilles girl. If they had allies on this ship, it would help their escape attempt a lot. If, by some miracle, it was Loro herself, well, Fett would have to find a way to thank her someday.

It took him five minutes to get back to his quarters. He fired up the communications system and piped in a call to *Chimaera*. This time he didn't hail Daala but put in a direct audio transmission to Venku. A video feed was slightly less secure and he wasn't going to take any chances.

After a short burst of static, the Mandalorian's voice rang in Fett's helmet. He said, "Venku reporting. What is it, *Mand'alor*?"

"Change of plans. I want you to bust Solo and the Twi'lek off *Chimaera*. Take a shuttle and all the Bessies on the way out."

There was only a tiny pause before he asked, "Did we get a new contract?"

Smart man, Venku. "The offers been made and I'm accepting. We'll be joining you. Can you have everyone ready in twenty minutes?"

"I'll have them in fifteen."

"Good. Wait twenty, then start the op."

"Affirmative. Good luck, *Mand'alor*."

What the hell. "Good luck, *Kad'ika*. Fett out."

BOOK 2: REVENGE

When he shut off the transmission he exhaled and let some of his tension seep out. He needed to take a moment to map out a plan of attack, then comm it to Jaller, Dinua, and Bess.

Boba Fett breathed in, breathed out. He thought of Mirta, and then thought of Dad. He even allowed himself a fickle, fleeting emotion he'd mostly burnt out of himself when he was ten years old: Hope.

He was going home.

Part III: Sister to Dragons

Chapter 16

Myri Antilles was on her bed, staring up at the blank ceiling, feeling her awareness dissolve into the emptiness around her. Helpless dread had given away to weariness and she was on the verge of finally drifting off to sleep when she heard what sounded like a short, sharp choking noise outside her door, followed by a muted thud.

Her eyes popped open. She stared at the ceiling and listened. For a few long heartbeats she heard nothing at all. Then her door swung open and a Mandalorian warrior in battered blue armor stepped into her cell.

She didn't get off the bed or say a word. She couldn't believe she wasn't dreaming.

"Get up!" the Mandalorian ordered. The voice sounded female.

Myri got to her feet, still not sure she wasn't dreaming.

The Mandalorian said, "We're getting out of here, Antilles, Right now."

"Where are you taking me?" Myri didn't move.

"Off the ship," the Mandalorian said. "We're meeting your cousin at the landing bay and grabbing a ship, but we need to go *now*."

She didn't believe her. It sounded too good to be true. But what were her other options, besides sit in her cell until Daala decided to have her executed?

"Now, Antilles!" the Mandalorian barked.

Myri moved. She stopped at the doorway to peek out into the hallway, a hallway she hadn't actually seen in almost two weeks. It was bright and white and so very long; she'd forgotten how big the world was outside her cell. A guard was slumped to either side of the door and she couldn't tell if either was alive or dead.

The Mandalorian gave her a hard push in the back. She scrambled out into the hallway and looked in both directions, surprised nobody was coming for her.

"Here," the Mandalorian said. She tossed a small hold-out blaster that Myri caught against her chest and fumbled to get a good grip on.

"You know how to use that?" her supposed rescuer asked.

"Not my preferred tool, but yeah." Myri checked the weapon. "This thing have a stun setting?"

Instead of answering the Mandalorian grabbed her by the upper arm and hauled her down the hallway. Myri tripped over her own legs trying to keep up; she'd done her best to exercise in confinement but the one thing she hadn't had the space for was regular walking.

When they reached the lift tube the car was already there. Myri stepped inside and her rescuer followed. The Mandalorian punched their destination into the control pad and got them moving.

"I'm amazed they haven't sounded the alarm," Myri muttered.

The Mandalorian tapped her helmet. "I'm putting out a jamming field that's killing their cameras, but the ones in the hall are going to come on any second. On the plus side, they'll be busy elsewhere."

"You mean Jag?" Myri asked. "Is Boba Fett with him?"

The Mandalorian nodded. Myri took a deep breath. It was happened, actually happening. She was getting off this cursed ship, she was going to be free, but she couldn't shake the sense of unreality. The woman in blue Mandalorian armor standing next to her might have been the cause.

"What's your name?" Myri asked.

The woman stared back at her, faceless in her battered T-visor helmet. She extended a hand. "Myri Antilles. Pleased to meet you."

BOOK 2: REVENGE

The Mandalorian stuck out her own black-gloved hand and shook. "Call me Bess."

"That's better." Myri withdrew her hand and checked the blaster again. "So, can this thing go stun?"

"No."

"What about the rifle?"

"Yes, but it's on *kill* and staying that way."

"I don't want to-"

"You want to get off this ship before they kill you," Bess said with finality.

Myri nodded gravely. She knew she wasn't going to win any argument but as the lift car slowed to a halt she promised herself she'd only fire above people's heads.

When the door opened she was greeted by an immediate test: four troopers in blue Alliance combat uniforms running to meet them.

One of them dropped to his knee, raised his rifle, and shouted, "Halt! Stop or-"

Bess nailed him in the chest with a red blaster bolt from the E-11 in her left hand. A long-barrel pistol had appeared in her right and she dropped another soldier with that one. The other two, surprised by the quick attack, threw themselves against the walls and fired a few shots back. Bess dropped them with a single shot from either gun, then nimbly stuck both weapons back in their holsters.

The whole time, Myri didn't fire a single shot.

When they were all on the ground, Bess turned and stared at Myri through the mirror-black visor of her helmet.

"Come on, Antilles! Let's go!"

Myri nodded weakly and followed.

Fy'lyor was on her bare red feet, facing Admiral Daala through the faint shimmer of her cell's force field. Neither woman said a word. Behind the admiral stood two more people, their faces masks of dispassion: grey-haired, refined-looking Drikl Lecersen on her left, and a scowling young woman named Miranda Fardreamer on her right. Apparently, Daala had brought them to bear witness.

Fy'lyor did her best to hold the smoldering light in Daala's eye and said, "Admiral, I request permission to join your mission."

"And why is that?" Daala asked. Her arms were crossed skeptically across her chest, and her tone was forbidding, but Fy'lyor knew the old woman wanted this. She wanted this because Fy'lyor reminded her of her young self.

Fy'lyor still wasn't sure how to feel about that, but she pressed on. "On reflection, I've decided that you are on the right side of this conflict, and I was on the wrong one. I'd like to rectify that."

"I imagine she wants to get out of her cell too," Miranda quipped. The woman was apparently one of Arefja's observers on *Chimaera*, and she didn't seem impressed by Daala's theatrics or Fy'lyor's apparent conversion.

"I want to serve the Empire," Fy'lyor said firmly. She doubted many things right now, but that was one thing in her life that had always been certain.

"Why?" asked Lecersen, in a tone she'd gotten from many older male officers. It wasn't just skeptical as to whether she was up for the job; it was skeptical as to why an alien woman would want to serve the Empire in the first place.

"Because the galaxy *needs* the Empire," Fy'lyor insisted. "The Alliance is fractured. Weak. They're dragging the rest of the galaxy down into their chaotic internal struggles. Fel and Vitor Reige seem intent on taking the Empire down a path that has already failed the Alliance. The people of this galaxy deserve better than that. They deserve a strong, wise ruler."

Miranda, who seemed to have shown some sympathy a moment before, looked skeptical again. She asked, "Who rules, then?"

"I don't know." Fy'lyor kept her eyes on Miranda. She didn't want to look at Daala *or* Lecersen right now. "I *do* know that the galaxy needs a strong Empire, right here, right now, to destroy the Yuuzhan Vong before they start another war."

As she said it she felt truth reverberate deep within, yet there were flickers of doubt when she thought back to Jagged Fel. He would be a better ruler than Daala *or* Lecersen, better by far, but he had betrayed the ideals of the Empire by embracing the very democracy that had failed the Alliance. Maybe it was that Jedi wife who had made him weak, she didn't know. More

than anything, Jagged Fel made her sad with the knowledge of what might have been.

Daala said, "Lieutenant Colonel Fy'lyor, do your pledge your loyalty to this mission?"

"I do." She shifted her gaze back to Daala's and held it.

"Will you serve aboard *Chimaera* with your fullest effort, skill, and passion?"

"I will."

Daala reached out and touched the panel on the wall. The force-barrier winked off and their eyes held, clear, unhindered by the blur of energy.

Fy'lyor's throat went dry. She swallowed and raised a hand in salute. "It's an honor to serve you, Admiral."

"And a pleasure to have you, Lieutenant Colonel." Daala smiled in honest pleasure. Behind her Miranda frowned, and Lecersen retained the look of lingering skepticism.

Before anyone could say any more, they heard the muted sound of blaster bolts outside. All four spun to face the door. Daala reached for the hold-out blaster at her hip.

The door swung open. Three Mandalorian warriors burst through, rifles level and ready to fire. Daala froze with her gun half-out of its holster.

The lead Mandalorian wore a battered suit of armor, steel-gray but marked over with splashes of red and gold paint. His helmet, impossibly, was that of an old clone trooper from sixty years ago.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Daala shouted. It clearly took all her effort not to pull out the blaster and start shooting.

"Jailbreak. We're here for Red," the Mandalorian said. He had the gruff voice of an old man.

"What about Solo?" Daala hissed. "Are you taking the Jedi too?"

"Oh, she's pretty *shabla* happy to leave." The Mando looked to Fy'lyor. "Come on, Red, let's go."

All eyes suddenly fell to her. Lecersen, shocked. Miranda, confused. Daala, pleading. And those three mirror-black T-visor helmets, inhuman and threatening.

Fy'lyor swallowed and said, "My place is on *Chimaera*. I'm staying here."

Daala looked back at the Mandalorians with something like triumph. The mercenaries stared ahead for a long silent moment. Then the old one said, "Fine. One less body to guard."

"Did Fett do this?" Lecersen stepped forward. "Did he switch sides?"

"Got a new contract, boss."

"I told you not to trust your pet bucket-boy," Lecersen sneered at Daala, then turned back to the old Manda-orian. "You're being fools."

"Are we now?" the warrior sounded genuinely amused.

"You *need* me," Lecersen took another step forward. "Without me you'll *never* get your antidote."

The Mandalorian shot once, taking Lecersen in the face at point-blank. The moff's body flew back, clattered against the wall, then fell to the floor. Miranda gasped and even Daala looked down at the smoking mess of Lecersen's head with shock and disgust.

"Trust me," the Mandalorian said, "I just did you a favor."

Then the three warriors backed out of the room and were gone.

Fy'lyor and Miranda were still staring at Lecersen's corpse when Daala fished her comlink out of her pocket. She barked, "Bridge, report! Report!"

There was no reply. She cursed, squatted down over the dead moff, fished into his pocket without hesitation, and pulled his comlink. She shouted into that one too but got nothing.

"They must have knocked out communications," Daala said, and swore again.

"Admiral?" Fy'lyor blinked, still struggling to comprehend what was going on.

"The Mandos have switched sides," Daala sneered. "And we have almost thirty of them on this ship. Do you have idea what kind of damage they can do?"

"We need to get to the bridge," Fy'lyor said. "This may be part of a larger attack."

"Very good, Lieutenant Colonel," Daala said without any show of satisfaction. "Both of you, come with me. There's no time to waste."

Daala turned for the door, Miranda on her heels. Fy'lyor hesitated for only a moment, then followed her into the hall on bare red feet.

BOOK 2: REVENGE

When Gotab and Venku showed up in her cell, she looked up in dread, wondering what new pain they had brought to torture her with. Neither of them said a word.

Then Gotab switched off the force-barrier and tossed her lightsaber into her lap. She fumbled with it, stunned, unspeakably glad to have its cold, hard, familiar form in her hands again but uncertain as to what they expected her to do with it.

"Come on, Jedi," Gotab said. "Time to run."

Jaina rose and held the lightsaber in front of her with both hands. "Run where? What do you mean?"

She heard the sound of a single blaster going off, somewhere down the hall. She rested her thumb on her saber's ignition switch but waited to turn it on.

Then she heard footsteps pounding the deck. Venku back-stepped into the hall to see what was going on.

"Come on!" he barked. "We have to move!"

Gotab followed, and after a moment of confusion, so did Jaina. She stepped out into the gray hallway just in time to see a trio of Mandalorians hurrying her way. The one in front, surprisingly, wore a battered old helmet that clone commandos had worn sixty years ago.

"Come on!" the Mando in front said, "Let's move!"

"Where's Red?" Venku asked.

"Didn't want to come." The man in the clone helmet looked at Jaina. "She good to fight?"

"I'm good," Jaina nodded. She wondered what had happened to Fy'lyor but would ask about it later. "Are we going to the hangar?"

"Smart little *Jeti*," the man grunted.

"What about my husband?"

"Fett's breaking him out now. Come on."

She still didn't understand why the Mandalorians had switched sides, but she was in no position to argue. The six of them hurried down the hallway to the lift. Once she got ten meters away from the jail cell the Force came rushing back to her, filling her with energy. There was so much she still didn't know, but she found herself filled with newfound confidence, the kind she'd been afraid she would never experience again.

They reached the turbolift without incident. It was not an easy task to fit one Jedi and five Mandos in full armor, but somehow they pulled it off.

"Why isn't anyone stopping us?" Jaina asked as the turbolift hummed around them.

"Knocked out their comm systems. Got 'em chasing their tails," A Mandalorian in maroon-and-violet armor chuckled.

"Mereel, what about Red?" Venku asked again.

"The *di'kut* wanted to stay with Daala," the one in the clone helmet said.

Jaina didn't know what she felt then; it was a strange combination of resentment, surprise, and disappointment. She'd never *liked* Fy'lyor (in part, she admitted, because of the way she looked at Jag) but the Twi'lek woman seemed like she'd have more sense than to join Daala on her mad revenge quest.

Of course, Jaina had read people wrong before.

As the turbolift decelerated, Mereel said, "Still, some-thing good came out of it. I shot that *chakaar* Lecersen."

"He's dead?" Jaina spat in surprise.

"Thought I'd do Daala a favor," Mereel sounded like he was grinning beneath that clone's helmet. "Y'know, compensation."

Some of the Mandos chuckled. Then the door swung open, and the fight began.

Captain Elscol Loro's first clue that something was wrong came from the confused expression of her security officer, spotted from the far side of *Phoenix's* bridge. She thought little of it, looked away, and looked back to see the man looking even more confounded.

She circled around the edge of the bridge, passing in front of the broad front viewports that showed the nebula's magnificent whorls and clouds of blood-red stellar gas, drifting slowly like a veil over a faint sea of stars. Normally she found the view fascinating, but right now she went straight to the security station and asked, "Is there a problem, Lieutenant?"

The man looked up at her and blinked small eyes in a round face. "Captain, I'm having some issues with the surveillance system."

"What deck?"

"Well... Several."

BOOK 2: REVENGE

Elscol felt the first spike of alarm then. She walked around the lieutenant's back to get a better view of his consoles. There were hundreds of security cameras on a ship the size of *Phoenix*, and his screens cycled through thumbnail images of a dozen at a time. A few screens in the upper-left corner were static, then switched to normal views of the auxiliary hangar, where Fel's captured shuttle was being guarded by a dozen soldiers. A few more static screens appeared in the bottom right, then cycled on to views of a hallway.

"What areas are being blocked out?" she asked.

"Ummm... Habitat sector, Deck C7."

Myri. "What else?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"Looks like one of the turbolifts, plus..." the lieutenant stopped, swallowed hard.

"What *else*?" Elscol repeated.

"Cell Block B... And..."

"Look!" Elscol stabbed a finger at the camera from Deck C7 which was suddenly giving feed again. It showed a long hallway, empty except for two figures crumpled against the wall.

"Alert all troops!" Elscol said. "And call the admiral! Get him on deck!"

"Yes, Captain!" the lieutenant said.

"Send two squads of marines to the auxiliary hangar. No, *four*," Elscol snapped.

"Four, Captain?"

"The Mandos," she snarled. "They'll try to take Fel out the way he came. We have to keep that hangar secure."

"Yes, captain," the lieutenant said, then ventured, "Captain... Should we try and capture them alive?"

Her first thought was to say yes, of course, the recapture Fel *and* Antilles was highest priority. This wasn't just an ordinary escape attempt, though. This was an attempt headed by Boba Fett, the deadliest man in the entire kriffing galaxy. There was no chance he or any of his other Mandalorians would be taken alive, and like-wise there was no chance of showing mercy. Any attempt to take captives would probably needlessly endanger the lives of her crew.

But to give the kill order would also almost certainly condemn the children of Wedge Antilles and Soontir Fel to death. Elscol thought back

on her first visit to Fel after his torture, where she'd revealed that his cousin was also held prisoner aboard *Phoenix*. She'd done it on impulse, without thinking, the way she'd used to do a lot of things. Just like when she'd been young, the impulse felt *right*.

Now she was wearing a uniform. She was responsible for the lives of her crew. Impulse had no place in her life anymore.

Yet she found herself saying, "I want Fel and Antilles alive. Use lethal force on Fett's people *only*."

The lieutenant looked hesitant for a second, then relayed the order. The thought occurred to Elscol that she might have just sacrificed her own people's lives to protect the daughter of a man she hadn't seen in decades.

She felt no regret, no regret at all. As alarm sirens began to wail on the bridge, an eager smile came to her face.

Strangely, impossibly, she felt young.

Jag Fel moved surprisingly well for a man who'd just been tortured. No wonder Jaina Solo took a shine to him.

With one arm in bandages, the opposite hand in a cast, and a whole pile of bacta patches covering the left side of his face, he wasn't in the condition to do any fighting, but he was able to keep pace with Boba Fett and Dinua Jeban as they ushered him down the auxiliary corridor toward *Phoenix's* lower deck.

They passed through one set of doors when laser blasts erupted from behind them. Fett shoved Fel behind him and began firing. Dinua did too, and together they brought down a pair of security officers on the far side of the hall.

"Don't have to kill them," Fel grunted.

"No time for discussion. Come on," Fett said, and gave the younger man a push through the doorway. Dinua followed, and when the door closed automatically behind them she blasted the control panel.

"Ought to buy us a little more time," she said. "Where to now?"

A display of the deck's floor plan ran on the heads-up-display on Fett's helmet. "Access chute to the right. Come on."

"Where are we going?" Fel asked as he hurried along, Fett in front of him and Dinua to the rear.

"We're getting you out of here."

"*Where?* Hangar bay?"

The end of the corridor came quickly. Instead of a doorway there was just the durasteel mesh of access grating. Dinua, strong young thing she was, knocked it out in one good kick. They could hear it clatter as it fell down the chute."

Fel poked his head through the portal and stared. It was a long way down. He looked back at the Mandalorians and said, "You're mad."

"Yeah. Crazy too." Fett grunted and held out an arm. "Hold on tight."

"You're *mad*," the man repeated. He could hustle, but the drugs and torture still had him addled. Fett didn't hold it against him; it could happen to anybody.

A burst of red lasers flashed down the hall. One shot winged Dinua in the arm, spilling smoke from her armor. She fired a pair of shots, taking down the nearest soldier, but more were coming down the hall.

Fett didn't waste time arguing. He grabbed Fel by the waist, pressed him against his chest armor in something like a bear-hug, then threw himself into the chute.

To his credit, Fel didn't shout. He couldn't grab on to anything but he tangled his legs with Fett's as they began to fall. The chute narrow but they were dropping feet-first. Fett fired the afterburners on his jet pack, angling them away from the nearest wall. He slowed their descent and after some ten long, long seconds of falling, they touched down softly at the bottom of the chute.

There was a crashing sound from above, and the light-burst from a flash grenade. Dinua didn't have a jet pack, but she fixed a grappling chord to the side of the chute and did a controlled drop. Fett pushed himself and Fel out into the corridor, giving Dinua room to land.

"Where are we going?" Fel said. "*Where?*"

"Right there," Fett pointed to the far end of the corridor.

It was darker and more cramped than the ones above, used mainly for utility access and, in cases like this, emergency escape. At the far end, barely visible in the dim red lighting, was a Mandalorian and two humans in blue Alliance uniforms.

Fel hurried down the hall to meet them. Fett called up Bess Skirata's frequency on his comlink and called, "Where are you, Bess?"

"Almost at rendezvous point, *Bob'ika*," she said. "Coming in hot."

"We're ready when you are." He switched off the link and turned his helmet speakers back on. He told Dinua, now reeling in her fiberchord beside him, "Last group's almost here. They've got company."

"They must have realized we're not going for the shuttle," Dinua said.

"Good for us we're almost gone," Fett said, and hurried down the corridor.

Fel was speaking with his two pilots, making sure they were alright, but he kept an awkward, unsurprising distance from Jaller Skirata's armored form.

The Mandalorian didn't seem to mind wary looks from his torture victim. His voice scratched inside Fett's helmet, saying, "Where's Bess?"

"On her way," Fett said. "She's got company."

"Best load up the pods now."

"Agreed." Fett switched his helmet speakers back on. "Okay, we got two more on the way, then we're out of here! Into the escape pods!"

He gestured to the three circular portals on the right wall. Fel looked the group over then told his pilots, "Go ahead, get in that pod. Get ready to seal it."

"What about you, sir?" one pilot asked.

Fel glanced at his Mandalorian rescuers. "I don't go until everyone else does."

"Jaller, get in with the pilots." Fett said. "Seal it tight and ready to blow on my mark."

"But Bess—"

"We'll take care of her, *ner vod*," Dinua said. "Come on! *Oya!*"

Jaller nodded and joined the pilots in the first escape pod. The door swung shut and the airlock hissed. Fel looked relieved to be away from Jaller, but only a little. He asked, "Where is Antilles?"

He got his answer with the approaching clatter of blasterfire. Suddenly the blast doors midway down the tunnel opened. A slim human woman with bright silver hair charged through first, followed by a Mandalorian in blue armor who was stepping backwards and firing with a blaster in each hand.

"Come on!" Fett barked. "Everybody in! Everybody!"

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Dinua raised her rifle and fired a round of shots over Antilles' head, splattering sparks around the doorway. Antilles dove right into the open airlock without a word, Fel on her heels.

Bess turned her back to the doorway just as Alliance troops came bursting through. She ducked low, letting Fett and Dinua fire a round of blaster bolts over her head, cutting down a pair of attackers. She went into the airlock first, then Dinua. Fett moved for the door and had one leg in when a blaster volley took him in the back.

It went right below his jet pack, catching the armor plate above the hips. He tumbled forward into the already-cramped escape pod. Even as pain shot up his body he shouted, "Go! Go! Go!"

Someone- Dinua or Bess- slammed the door shut. The airlock hissed and the lights went dim.

"Launch!" Dinua shouted, to Bess or the other pod or both. "Launch now!"

The escape pod jolted, shuddered, then rocketed forward on its ejection thrusters. With five people in the pod there wasn't much room for them to bounce around, but Fett heard Myri shout in pain as Bess's helmet pounded her in the gut, while Dinua gave out an uncharacteristically feminine yelp as her arm got tangled with Fett's leg.

The hard force of ejection lasted only a minute. After that they were flying free, drifting toward the surrounding red gases of the nebula.

"Jaller's pod is clear," Dinua reported as she pulled her limb free from Fett's. "Are you okay, *Mand'alor*?"

Fett tried to sit up but it pained his lower back. He held in a groan, surrendered himself to lying down for the moment, then said, "I'll be fine."

"What happens next?" From her voice, the Antilles girl was still rattled.

"The way we are now, they'll just grab us in a second," Fel said.

Fett allowed a dry, rattling laugh. "Have a little faith. Your wife's on the way."

Chimaera's secondary hangar bay was a storm of violence. Jaina threw herself into her newly-recovered Force and knew it all. She sensed the stormtroopers on the overhead catwalks, firing downward as friend and foe scampered beneath. She sensed the formation of Mandalorians charging

toward the boxy assault shuttle on the left side of the bay, led by the big, boisterous, familiar presence of Baltan Carid. As most of the stormtroopers concentrated their fire on the main group, a half-dozen Mandos crept around the outer walls of the hangar, sneaking mostly-unnoticed toward the line of six sleek *Besu*-like fighters on the far wall.

And Jaina was in the middle of it. She stretched out with the Force and moved her lightsaber without thought. She caught one blaster bolt after another, deflecting it toward the wall or ceiling or the stormtroopers sniping from the catwalks. She moved with the main charge of Mandalorians, protecting them as much as they protected her.

She wasn't alone. Gotab stood to one side with Mereel. Both of them moving a little more slowly than the others, but Mereel kept shooting and Gotab kept deflecting blast after blast with his lightsaber.

And, finally, Venku was at the head of the charge with Carid, holding one of his mother's lightsabers in each hand. Jaina didn't have to watch him to know that he was sinking into the Force in a way he almost never allowed himself to do. He caught laser blasts, deflected them, cut down a stormtrooper in his way with ruthless dispassion.

Veku and Carid were the first ones into the assault shuttle. As the rest of the Mandos hurried in, Venku charged back out into the fray, lightsabers still ignited. He swung back laser blasts as he moved toward Jaina, Mereel, and Gotab.

"Oya!" he shouted. "Hurry!"

Jaina was dimly aware of the growing roar of startling thrust engines. She stayed close to Mereel and Gotab, keeping back blaster bolts that fell with increasing frequency on the stragglers. She felt something in the Force above her, a predatory eagerness, and risked throwing her head back and looking straight up.

She saw some senior officer up on the catwalks, surrounded by a half-dozen stormtroopers, fixing the barrel of an E-Web heavy repeating blaster straight down at them.

"Heads up!" she shouted. The E-Web was too powerful for their sabers to casually deflect. She reached out with the Force, rending the metal of the catwalk in an attempt to throw the weapon to the hangar floor.

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It went off, firing one-two-three-four blasts. Heavy red plasma bolt tore wildly across the hangar, gouging black debris from the deck, one-two-three-

-Venku raised both sabers to deflect the fourth blast, but it wasn't enough. The heavy bolt hit him in the side of the helmet, spinning him around, dropping him to the ground, sending his sabers skidding across the smoking deck.

"*Kad'ika!*" someone shouted; Gotab or Mereel or both or someone else. Jaina knew only the surge of anger inside her, and for one brief moment she allowed herself to tame it, use it, draw strength from it.

She held out her hand, and a wave of Force energy tore the catwalk from its moorings. The walkway, the soldiers, the captain, and the E-Web came crashing down.

Fire and smoke filled the hangar. Jaina sensed Gotab and Mereel scooping up Venku's lightsabers while another Mando she didn't know picked up the fallen warrior and carried him over his shoulders, armor and all, toward the assault shuttle's deck.

In the haze and chaos few attackers risked firing. Jaina waited until all four Mandos were aboard, then charged up into the belly of the assault shuttle.

"We're all in!" she shouted. "Move out! Move out!"

The long passenger hold of the shuttle was packed with armored Mandalorians, most standing but a few lying injured or dying on the floor. The light was dim, but Jaina could easily make out Venku's eclectic armor. Two old Mandos, helmets off, were leaning over him: she recognized one as Gotab, and from the clone helmet at his knees, the one with the white beard and long braided hair must have been Mereel.

A part of her realized, with muted astonishment, that Mereel must have been an *actual*/clone, who had fought in the *actual*/Clone Wars, but she pushed surprise and curiosity aside as she knelt next to Venku. Gotab was pulling off his black scarred helmet and reaching out with the Force. The helmet had saved Venku from sudden death, but in the dim light Jaina could see the blood gleaming in his hair.

"He's alive," Jaina said. "I can feel him."

"I can too," Gotab said "But he's hurt, real bad."

The shuttle jerked hard, nearly throwing everyone off their feet. Jaina heard the sound of muffled explosions from outside and, leaving Venku in the healer's hands, hurried to the shuttle's cockpit.

Baltan Carid was in the copilot's seat. His helmet was off and his tattooed face was slick with sweat. He glanced at Jaina as she barged in and said, "Hello again, *Jeti*. You're welcome. Meet your pilot, Jendri."

"Yeah, you're welcome too," Jaina nodded at the man in the green helmet. He was pulled the control yoke back and flooring the accelerator. The shuttle dipped out of *Chimaera's* main hangar bay, revealing a stunning spread of scarlet nebular gases beyond. The red thrust engines of two *Besu*-like appeared in front of them.

"What about the tractor beam?" Jaina asked.

A few more explosions sounded behind them in reply, and four more Mandalorian starfighters raced ahead to join their kin. Green turbolaser blasts begin to lance across space, and Jendri began to jerk and juke the shuttle to evade.

As the shuttle moved to evade, Jaina got a fuller picture from the viewport. She potted an array of capital ships hiding in the heart of the nebula: a *Venator*-class destroyer as old as Mereel and Gotab, a few *Lancer*-class ships, three Bothan Assault Cruisers, two Mon Cal ships... and a compact, sleek *Nebula*-class star destroyer.

She stabbed a finger at it. "Where's Jag? Is he there?"

"He's with Fett, don't worry," Carid said. "We've just got to pick him up..."

"Oh *shab*!" Jendri suddenly spat.

"What is it?" Jaina asked, ice in her gut.

"Three ships inbound... We've got company!"

Chapter 17

Daala and Aref'ja had found an excellent place to hide themselves. Without the beacon from Jagged Fel's captured shuttle, there was no way the search parties from *Starless* would have found them. The luminous red gases of the nebula had a wonderful effect of scrambling long-range sensors, not to mention obscuring visual scans. The nebula also presented a navigational hazard; enough particles were mixed in with the gases that any ship had to drop out of hyperspace in order to avoid the formation entirely, lest they collide with a mass shadow and be destroyed. An ambush, like the kind Daala had pulled on Trinity fleet, was impossible. Even when navigating at sublight, a pilot had to be careful not to mistake a drift of harmless gas with a field of scattered iron deposits. Daala and Aref'ja had been lucky enough to find a pocket of empty space in the heart of the nebula big enough to fit their sizeable combined fleet.

The one good thing about the nebula was that it mucked up everybody's scanners equally. That way, Wraith Squadron could sit in their StealthX fighters on the outer edge of the pocket, monitor everything going on in the fleet, and not have to worry about being spotted.

At the beginning they'd sent a pair of Recon-X ships into the nebula in order to track down Fel's beacon. Once the recon flight had performed a

thorough scan of the enemy, Sharr and Drikall had jumped back to *Starless*, and six StealthX fighters had gone in to take their place, wait, and watch until *Starless* arrived for a rescue.

For the first few hours Jesmin had been tense. Her matte black X-wing formed the aft-port part of the flight trio with Voort in lead and Trey Courser on the opposite side. Like the second trio of Thaymes, Turman, and Wran Narcassan, they cut their engines and drifted in space, dead, except for their passive scanners. They kept their comms online but maintained radio silence.

They hid a safe distance from the enemy fleet but Jesmin still felt slightly terrified as she watched, counted, and re-counted the strange mélange of ships. Bothan, Mon Cal, Alliance and Imperial; old and new; battered and bright. It was terrifying to think that there were this many people, from so many different nations and races and walks of life, who would come together for the sole purpose of exterminating another sentient species.

After the first tense hours, she found herself giving way to her own weariness. Things had moved so fast since the ambush she barely had time to process it all. Tahiri had transferred to *Corusca Gem* and set a course for Zonama Sekot. Scut and Huhunna had gone with her. Jesmin had no idea what Tahiri might be thinking right now, even less Scut, now that he was on the verge of seeing his people, maybe for the first real time.

She wondered if Zonama Sekot would shoot the entire fleet out of the sky. Fifteen years ago it had been friendly, but now some of the Vong, at least, were on the warpath again, and maybe Sekot was no longer friendly either. Fifteen years was a long time, and a lot could change; just look at Jacen Solo. Captain Antilles was apparently willing to make the leap of faith that it would still help them. So, too, were Tahiri and Scut.

As for Jesmin, she was floating in space, alone in her vacuum-sealed cockpit, waiting for something to happen.

She tried to stretch out with the Force. She could just barely sense Voort and Trey's presence in the nearby ships but didn't know if they were nervous, happy, or asleep in their cockpits. She certainly couldn't feel anything from the thousands of souls in the renegade fleet, and wondered if Tahiri, Doran, or her mother would have been able too. In a way she wished they would be as blind as her. Sometimes she got sick of being second-rate. It was why

she'd moved around so much, looking for something she could be first-rate at.

Her woolgathering was turning to self-pity, the kind she'd thought behind her once she joined the Wraiths, when Voort's mechanical voice suddenly screeched in her headset. It nearly shocked her out of her seat.

"Look alive. *Starless* inbound."

Jesmin stretched her body forward, straining the crash webbing, and twisted her head awkwardly to look behind her. She could barely make it out, but it was there: a dark, broad wedge cutting through red nebular gas, with a compact Corellian gunship blazing to either side.

"Check the fleet," Turman said over headset.

"What about them, Shifter?" asked Wran. "They're not doing anything."

"Exactly, Shooter. No fighters scrambled. No weapons hot. Wait- a couple ships are training guns on *Starless*. The Bothans, the Mon Cals."

"Not *Phoenix*." Jesmin checked her scanner and frowned. "Not *Chimaera* either. What are they doing?"

"Wait, I'm getting something!" Wran said. "Some-thing's launching from *Chimaera*. Looks like... one shuttle, half-dozen snubs."

"Those aren't normal snubs," Jesmin felt her chest tighten. "Those are Mando fighters. What do they call them, Bess-somethings?"

"They're shooting at them!" Wran sounded at once confused and excited. "*Chimaera* is shooting at the Bessies! It's an escape!"

"Check *Phoenix*." Voort's harsh voice cut in. "Two escape pods just ejected."

"Shuttle and Bessies on course for *Phoenix*," Turman said. "The *Venator*-class is moving to intercept. Launch-ing squints and eyeballs."

"It's an *escape*!" Wran marveled. "It has to be!"

"Yeah, but who's escaping?" Thaymes asked.

An obvious answer jumped through Jesmin's mind, the same answer everybody else was thinking too. They knew that captives from *Justifier* had been taken to *Chimaera*. Fel's shuttle had been taken to *Phoenix*. There was a very, very real chance that Jagged Fel was in one of those escape pods.

"Time to change plans," Voort said. "I'm calling *Starless*. Stand by."

Nobody spoke on the comm. Nobody fired engines. *Starless* broke through the veil of red stardust and vectored toward the massive fleet that seemed to have finally noticed it was there; a trio of Bothan Assault Cruisers

moved to meet it. The Mando shuttle raced toward the old *Venator*-class and the Bessies did a deadly dance with the TIEs.

As for Jesmin and the other Wraiths, they just watched and waited and prayed they weren't already too late.

Captain Syal Antilles had put together an elaborate, layered set of plans for getting back Jagged Fel. First came negotiations, then distraction, then well-placed use of force by the Wraiths. She'd been well aware of the saying that no plan survives first contact with the enemy, but hers didn't even make it that long.

The gases of the nebula were still causing residual problems with *Starless's* sensors, but they were also receiving information on a tight-beam cast from Wraith Leader's StealthX. Syal and Kre'fey hunched over the tactical holo as Piggy's data showed in live detail the assault shuttle making a suicidal charge against ancient *Valor* while six *Besu'liike* fighters danced like deadly daggers around two squadrons of TIEs. Meanwhile, *Phoenix* had locked onto the two escape pods and was reeling them back in.

Syal watched the old Bothan for some kind of guidance but he looked as confused as she was.

"Captain, incoming transmission from Wraith Leader," the communications officer reported.

"Send it to me," Syal told him.

Piggy's harsh, comforting voice sounded from the tactical console. "*Starless*, something's happening. Do you see it?"

"We've got your feed, Lead," Syal said. "Do you have any idea what's going on?"

"None, Captain. But if Daala *and* Aref'ja are both trying to stop those Mandos-

"Then you think we should help them."

"I don't see what we have to lose. It could be Fel out there right now."

The hope had occurred to her, but Syal had learned long ago how to swat hope down. There were any number of explanations as to what was going on in the fleet right now and the Mandalorians had given no sign whatsoever of being friendly thus far.

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But the chance was there, the stupid chance to save Fel and maybe Fy'lor and Jaina Solo too, and somehow make up for some of her failures.

She glanced at Kre'fey's intense, violet eyes. His gaze met hers and he nodded.

"Wraith Squadron, go after the escape pods," she said. "I'll try to send help."

"Copy, *Starless*. Engaging."

The link shut off with a mechanical *click*. Syal turned to the tactical station and said, "Get me two squads in the air, now. And a shuttle with a rescue team. They're going after the escape pods."

"What about Bren's welcome?" Kre'fey asked, jabbing a claw at the viewport and the three pale Bothan Assault Cruisers accelerating toward them.

"We'll open a channel," Syal said. That had been the first step of her original plan, but she hadn't expected to sail in on a jailbreak- or whatever was going on.

"And tell them what?" Kre'fey snarled, clearly not satisfied.

Syal didn't have an answer, but before she could even attempt one the tactical lieutenant said, "Captain, we have incoming! More ships coming out of the nebula!"

"What ships?" Syal's breath caught in her chest. Her people were en route to Zonama Sekot and all the entire renegade fleet seemed to be here. That left only one candidate.

"I'm picking up three capital ships, frigate-size, coming in from behind *Chimaera*. Looks like they're launching fighters." The lieutenant met Syal's eyes. Even from halfway across the bridge she could see his dread. "Captain, it's the Vong."

Five people was a lot to squeeze inside an escape pod, especially when three of them wore big heavy armor and another had bandages wrapped all over his hands and face. A part of Myri wanted to be back in her cell. Another part was afraid she was about to get her wish.

They'd managed to squeeze everyone into the seating pads along the circular walls. Myri was wedged between Boba Fett, who was still having problems moving after a shot to the back, and her rescuer, Bess. Unlike Fett

and the woman in the dark green armor, Bess has taken off her helmet. Myri was surprised to find that the woman was only a little older than her. She had a round face, tan skin, and dark brown hair that spilled over her armored shoulders. She was straining her neck to see through the lone port hole on the pod's ceiling.

Reluctantly, Myri followed her gaze. When they'd first ejected they'd seen a dizzying whirl of stars. All that had suddenly stopped when their pod jerked under the grip of a tractor beam. Now Bess and Myri were both looking up in expectation and dread as *Phoenix's* white belly drew closer. The second escape pod, the one with the pilots and the fourth Mandalorian, was being drawn in ahead of them.

"This is no good," Bess said. "Where's our rescue?"

"Working on it," the woman in green armor said. She was punching the control panel on the wall, trying to get the escape pod's transmitter working. A few more blows and she'd start denting the wall.

"No good," Jagged Fel muttered. The man looked absolutely awful. His lone eye was bloodshot, his skin was deathly pale, bandages covered half his face and his lips were dry and cracked.

"We have to try," Myri said.

"It's short range," Fel shook his head. "Only thing close enough to hear is... *Phoenix*."

"Look!" Bess pointed to the viewport. Four more heads looked up again and saw red laser bolts flashing through space.

"Are they here?" Myri asked. "Is it them?"

"Bessies have *green* lasers," Boba Fett grunted.

Suddenly something else shot across space. They looked almost like proton torpedoes, but instead of blazing on miniature thrust engines the warheads seemed to trail belched fire, like a volcanic explosion.

"Oh *no*," the woman in green armor said.

Suddenly a pair of those volcanic warheads slammed into the escape pod before them. They cracked the pod's hull open like an egg, and a moment later it burst into a fountain of flame.

"*No!*" Bess shouted. "Jaller! No!"

Myri stared ahead, too stunned and transfixed to be afraid. She saw a Yuuzhan Vong coralskipper streak across space, firing more of those warheads, but not at them. A spray of red laserfire chased the coralskipper,

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and the black streak of a Stealth X-wing flicked into view and was gone just as fast.

"They're here!" Myri shouted. "That's Alliance!"

"Could be the renegades," Fett said.

"Is that comm working?" Myri found herself shouting, even in the cramped pod. "Is it?"

"Hold on." The woman in green said. She flicked a few switches and said aloud, "This is the escape pod. We need rescue now!"

Another of those molten warheads streaked across space. Myri saw an X-wing chase a coralskipper across the white belly of the star destroyer, lancing it with stuttering laser blasts until it exploded.

Myri let out a whoop. "Good shot! Send a little light this way! We have Jagged Fel aboard, repeat, we have Jagged Fel and we need rescue!"

Jesmin felt only a dim sense of satisfaction as the coralskipper ahead of her exploded in a spray of yorik coral and flame. There were plenty more where that came from, and they'd added another, deadlier level to what was already a confusing mess of a fight. Piggy had said that reinforcements from *Starless* were on the way, but they sure weren't here yet.

Jesmin pulled her fighter away from *Phoenix's* hull, all too aware that her flaring red backside was exposed to its turbolasers. She bounced her stick left and right, hoping to rob them of an easy target, when a burst of static came over her headset.

"-od shot! Send... this way! We... -agged Fel! Repeat, we have Jagged Fe- ...rescue!"

"Anyone else getting that?" Jesmin asked.

"I hear it, Ranger," Wran said. "It's the pod!"

Jesmin flipped her comm onto the broadest frequency. "Escape pod, repeat. Do you have Jagged Fel aboard?"

"Yes!" The voice came in clearer this time. It was a woman's. "They're still pulling us in!"

"Keep those *shabla* skips off our backs!" a man's voice crackled.

"Copy." Jesmin pointed her fighter toward the pod and accelerated. "Wraith Lead, tell *Starless* Fel is in the pod!"

"Reporting now," Piggy said.

"Wraith?" the woman's voice nearly shouted in Myri's ear. "This is roller! Do you hear me, *Roller!* Myri!"

Jesmin was so surprised she nearly winged the pod. She jerked away at the last moment then pulled her X-wing into a tight U-turn back toward the pod and the destroyer.

"Myri?" Turman said. Jesmin could hear him gaping.

"Shifter, is that you?" It was Myri, all right. Her voice shook with joy and relief.

Somehow, Jesmin didn't feel shock or even joy. She only felt sudden, unyielding determination not to fail her friend again. She said, "Roller, this is Ranger. We'll break that tractor beam, just give us a sec! Smiles, on me!"

She kicked in her thrusters and raced past the pod, toward the looming destroyer, as Trey's X-wing settled on her tail. She figured if she stayed close to the tractor beam the gunners wouldn't fire at her, lest they miss and hit the pod by mistake.

That wouldn't keep the Vong off her back, but she hoped her other pilots would take care of that.

The turbos didn't fire, at least not at her. She pointed the nose of her ship at the tractor beam emplacement just forward of *Phoenix's* main hangar and checked to make sure she had two proton torpedoes ready to fire.

"What are we doing, Ranger?" Trey asked. "They've got shields all over the hull!"

"I can pop two torps into the beam," she said. "The tractor will reel them right in. The first should punch through the shields, the second hit the hull."

"What? How are you going to fire into the beam? You can't see it!"

"I've heard Jedi can do it."

"You're not a Jedi, you're a drop-out!"

She wanted to tell Trey to can it, but he was right. Maybe, just maybe, if she could shut out everything around her, she could reach out with the Force and feel *something* that could guide her torps into the path of the tractor beam, but right now she was in the middle of a chaotic three- or four-way firefight, she wasn't even sure which anymore, and charging fast toward the hull of the enemy flagship.

"We got Vong, fast to port!" Trey cried.

Jesmin didn't move her stick. She knew if she pulled off-course she could never find it and she'd never hit the beam emitter. Instead of gunning it she

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slammed the brakes. Trey soared forward and peeled away, barely missing a volley of molten torpedoes. Three coral-skippers appeared in front of her, slanting in from the port side and turning to meet her. She still didn't break off.

There was a flurry of concussion missiles and one of the coralskippers exploded. The others peeled off, dodging set of missiles. A trio of sleek, angular Manda-lorian fighters raced in pursuit.

"Thank you whoever you are!" Jesmin cried.

"Thank us later, *aruetii*," a sour voice came on her headset. "Kill that tractor!"

"Kriffing Mandos," Trey swore.

Jesmin didn't pay attention. She barely heard him at all, or the Mandalorian's biting retort. It came with her burst of relief: a sense of sure and steady purpose, an unshaking belief, a total conviction that all she had to do was *shoot*.

Call it the Force, call the gut. She squeezed the trigger and pulled away.

She didn't have to see the torpedoes accelerate and double normal speed, pulled in by the tractor beam they had intercepted. She knew the first one impacted on the shields, tearing them open for a critical moment. She felt the second one streak ahead, hit the emitter, and explode.

"You did it!" Trey whooped. "You *actually* did it!"

For one moment, as she pulled the joystick to her chest and stars and lasers whirled around her, Jesmin felt a moment of utter *oneness* with the universe, the kind her mother talked about, when you could see everything and feel everything and know everything but can't even start to put it into words, but that's okay because you know you're one with everything and everything is the Force.

Then stray laser blasts winged her shields and rocked her fighter. The moment was gone, and it was back to the fight.

When the tractor beam let go, the pod started tumbling through space. Myri's stomach tried to jump through her lungs and poor Jagged Fel was tossed hard into Boba Fett's armored shoulder. Myri tried to keep her eyes on the viewport above. *Phoenix's* pale belly went spinning out of view. Stars, lasers, and molten torpedoes whipped chaotically by. One ugly coralskipper

was barreling right toward them, and Myri's breath caught in terror. Then the skipper exploded and the dagger-like shape of a Manda-lorian fighter whipped by.

"That's our Bessies!" The one in green armor whooped.

Myri glanced at the woman next to her. "You're named after a starfighter?"

"I was named after my grandmother!" Bess snapped.

"Must've been some Mando warrior," Myri breathed.

"She was an *accountant*."

Suddenly the pod stopped spinning. Fel knocked his head against Bess's shoulder plates this time. Myri tried to hold herself steady, palms flat against the wall. The surrounding nebula was steady but she had no idea what had grabbed them this time.

"I thought that tractor beam was down!" she shouted to Jesmin or Piggy or whoever was out there.

"Hold on tight," an unfamiliar voice said, male and maybe old. The stars began to pan in one direction. "You got the *Mand'alor* aboard?"

"Get us out of here, Carid!" Fett snapped.

"Gracious as always," the man on the comm sighed. "Keep your belts buckled, kids. We're not out of this yet."

"They have Fel aboard. Repeat, they have Fel," Voort's voice crackled over the comlink.

Syal and Kre'fey both leaned over the tactical console intently, watching the display of dancing holographic markers denoting the renegade Wraith, Yuuzhan Vong, and Mandalorian starfighters now dancing and twirling around each other, as well as the all-important escape pod.

Elsewhere, the battle was not going as well. The starfighter support from *Starless* had been intercepted by a screen of A-9 Vigilance fighters from the Bothan cruisers, and they were already losing pilots. The gunships *Viridian* and *Cerulean* were moving in to attack the A-9s, but that would put them within range of the Bothans' heavy guns. Meanwhile, the Vong frigates had yet to come fully into the fray, but seemed content to let their fighters cause havoc.

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"Even if they get the pod, there's no good escape vector," Kre'fey hissed. His claws were leaving scratch marks on the console.

"I know," Syal said, wishing she'd brought *Corusca Gem* or *Liberty Star* along.

"Captain!" Voort said, "The pod is free! The Mandos have it!"

"Where are they taking it?" Kre'fey snapped.

After a short pause, Voort reported, "They're trying to make a run for *Starless*, but it's dense out here, and *Valor* is moving to block us."

"We have to meet them," Kre'fey said. "Charge past the cruisers, even if it means sacrificing the gunships."

"Captain," Voort said, "It's not just Fel in the pod! It's Boba Fett, and... it's Myri, Captain. *Myri* is aboard!"

Syal was too stunned to speak. She worked her jaw soundlessly while Kre'fey leaned forward intently. "Wraith Lead, head for sector B-7. We'll intercept you there."

"Yes!" Syal breathed. "Do it, Piggy! Protect that pod!"

"Will do, Captain," Voort said, and closed the comlink.

Syal stared at the little blue marker on the tactical holo, the one surrounded by swarming enemies, the one that held all the hope she thought she'd banished forever.

Kre'fey was already turning to bark orders, but she shouted above him, "Helm, set course for sector B-7, full thrust! Starboard shields at maximum! Prepare a firing solution for those Bothans, they'll try to flank us!"

She spun away from the holo and stared out the front viewport. Engines danced and explosions blossomed against the backdrop of blood-red stardust. Somewhere in that dark cold chaos was the sister she'd given up for dead, and Syal would burn everything in her path until she had her back again.

The three Yuuzhan Vong frigates hung like omens on the edge of the battle zone. They'd emerged from the nebula in the middle of the fight and taken everyone by surprise, most of all the crew onboard *Chimaera*.

When Fy'lyor arrived on the bridge with Daala and Miranda Fardreamer, she was taken aback by the chaos. Somehow she'd assumed Daala's crew, manning the most famous ship in the Empire no less, would be a model of

efficiency and order, but they walked into a bedlam of officers and ensigns shouting orders to each other across the bridge.

"Report!" Daala had thundered. She stalked down the middle aisle between the crew pits and scanned the entire bridge with a glare that brought everyone into line.

The section lieutenants barked out oral reports in order, and the picture wasn't good. The Mandalorians had some-how taken out both primary and back-up comm systems, which meant that the bridge was left communicating with gunnery, hangar, and engine crew via chains of short-range hand-held comlinks. The Mandalorians had made a mess of the auxiliary hangar on the way out, in the process killing the ship's captain, Remal, who had gone down to oversee the fight.

In space, the situation was even more confused. *Phoenix* was being swarmed over by Alliance, Mandalorian, and Yuuzhan Vong ships. Jagged Fel had apparently been broken out and escaped in a pod, which was currently latched on to the assault shuttle stolen from *Chimaera*. The Alliance flagship *Starless* was trying to intercept the shuttle but three of Arefja's Bothan cruisers were moving to block it. The ancient destroyer *Valor* was the closest friendly vessel to the shuttle and was trying to intercept.

And those three Yuuzhan Vong frigates were circling the battle zone like hungry vultures. One lingered aft of *Chimaera*, another was drifting toward *Phoenix*, and the third was circling toward Arefja's two Mon Cal cruisers, *Lacentra* and *Cha Niathal*.

As Daala got her reports, Fy'lyor glanced at Miranda. The teenager's jaw was clenched in tension and her hands were balled into helpless angry fists at her side. Fy'lyor knew the feeling.

Daala, however, seemed to be in her element. She shouted orders to every lieutenant, flung her hands in wild gestures at the battle unfolding beyond the viewport, and bore wild grin on her face. Fy'lyor was terrified that Vong ship might move in to engage while their systems were crippled, but Daala seemed to relish the fight.

"Admiral," one of the officers shouted, "We're getting a new ship coming out of the nebula!"

"Vong or Alliance?" Daala asked calmly, seemingly unworried by either prospect.

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"Admiral, it's..." The lieutenant's brows drew together in confusion. "It's the Chiss, Admiral."

For the first time since that crazed Mando gunned down Lecersen, Daala was taken aback. She spun on the viewport and stared out at the battle and the red stardust beyond, searching for the ship with her naked eyes. Fy'ylor could see nothing.

"Approach vector?" Daala asked, still scanning the battlefield.

"Heading toward *Phoenix* and *Valor*, Admiral."

Daala smacked her hands together. "Can we launch fighters?"

After a moment, someone said, "We can give the launch order, Admiral, but it might take five minutes to scramble."

"Do it in three and you're promoted," Daala said. "I want everything we've got in the air. We *have* to get that shuttle!"

Fy'ylor wanted to point out that the Vong frigate was still hovering behind them, but she knew there would be no arguing, not with Daala.

As much as she didn't want to admit it to herself, beneath all the fear and shock, a small part of Fy'ylor was excited too.

As *Celestial* broke through the red veils of the nebula and cut toward the battle, she was met with immediate response. The old *Venator*-class destroyer, marked as *Valor*, had been pulled tight alongside *Phoenix*, not to battle it but to box in the assault shuttle that was currently at the center of a frenzied battle between X-wings, coralskippers, and TIE fighters. Now *Valor* angled its nose upward so that its forward gun batteries would have a better shot at the incoming Chiss warship.

Ben Skywalker stood on *Celestial's* bridge, trying to take it all in. He'd been released from his black imprisonment just thirty minutes before, and had been escorted to the bridge while *Celestial's* first officer, a lean blue-skinned man whose name Ben couldn't hope to pronounce, told him that Commodore Fel had been monitoring Alliance fleet movements from a distance and tracked *Starless* to the heart of this nebula, where renegade ships under command of Admirals Daala and Aref'ja were gathered. When it became apparent that a prisoner escape was being attempted within the renegade fleet, Commodore Fel had decided to intervene in her brother's favor.

Ben got no apology for being locked up, alone and hungry in the dark, but frankly he hadn't been expecting one either. At least they gave him a front-row view.

Wynssa Fel was standing at the head of the bridge, watching as lances of green plasma streaked up to meet them. The first volley splattered on *Celestial's* forward shields while the Chiss warship returned fire with its own forward batteries. The bridge deck shook under the second barrage, but Wynssa barely wobbled on her feet.

"Commodore, *Phoenix* is preparing to fire," one of the Chiss officers reported.

"Reinforce ventral shields," Wynssa said. "Keep firing on *Valor*."

"Yes, Commodore."

"Communications, get me a line on that shuttle."

"Yes, ma'am."

The vessel shook again under the third barrage. Ben found himself impressed by how well the Chiss crew composed themselves, even in a frenzied battle.

"Commodore, we have a line on the shuttle."

"Open it." Wynssa stalked over to the communications station and Ben followed. "Have the launch bay standing by."

"Are you sending out fighters?" Ben asked as he intercepted Wynssa by the console.

The blond woman shot him a cold glance, like she wished she'd kept him in the brig. Then she turned to the comm officer and said, "Open the channel."

"Channel is open."

Wynssa leaned forward and spoke into the transceiver. "Assault shuttle, this is *Celestial*. Our bays are open. Can you make it?"

Ben's breath caught in his chest. In the chaos of battle, it was hard to pick out specific Force signatures, but he was hoping, praying, that his cousin was aboard the shuttle.

"Copy, *Celestial*," came a man's voice he didn't recognize. "Can we bring our Bessies in?"

The comm officer gave Wynssa and cautious look. Ben understood it easily; The Chiss did not like having visitors aboard their ships, and a bunch

of heavily armed Mandalorians would be more unwelcome than most. At this point, though, there was little choice.

"We'll provide cover for them once you land," Wynssa said. "We'll make sure they get to *Starless*."

"Copy, *Celestial*. On our way now, but that Venator's trying to cut us off."

"We'll draw its fire," Wynssa said. "Just get here."

"You're the boss, boss."

"Is Jaina aboard?" Ben blurted out, drawing dagger-like stares from Wynssa and the comm officer.

"Ben, is that you?" Jaina's voice sounded tired and harried, but it was still enough to warm Ben's heart.

"Great to hear from you," Ben said. "How's Jag?"

There was a pause, short but long enough for Wynssa's stern mask to drop in worry. Finally, Jaina said, "He'll be okay. Just open your barn doors and let us in."

"We will," Wynssa said. "*Celestial*, out."

The comm officer shut the link and Ben and Wynssa took a step back from the console. Ben let go of a long breath. Wynssa did the same.

Before he could think of something to say to her, the first officer appeared behind them and said, "Commo-dore, we have an incoming Yuuzhan Vong frigate."

Ben swore inwardly. The Chiss ship was top-of-the-line, able to hold its own against both the newer *Phoenix* and the aged *Valor* at the same time. The Yuuzhan Vong frigate was an unknown quantity, but it threatened to tip the scales against them.

"What vector?" Wynssa asked, voice tense.

"Port side, Commodore. She'll be within firing range in a few minutes." The first officer's cool Chiss exterior was starting to crack as well. "Commodore, our shields might not be able to take it."

"We can't leave without the shuttle!" Ben insisted.

"I *know*!" Wynssa snapped. "Captain, hold as long as you can. Redirect portside batteries four through ten and fire on the frigate."

"Understood, Commodore," the first officer nodded, then darted to the tactical station.

"You ever fought the Yuuzhan Vong before?" Ben glanced at Wynssa.

She suddenly looked very worried, and very young. She shook her head. "Me neither," he said, "But I guess there's a first time for everything."

He tried to reach out with the Force. He still couldn't make out Jaina, but he could certainly feel the mess of anger, confusion, and desperation in the fighter pilots and the crews of *Phoenix*, *Valor*, even *Celestial*. He tried to grope out with his senses, wondering if there would be anything aboard the Vong ship besides a painful *lack*. Jaina had told him about the voxyn they'd encountered on Yavin 4: half-vornskyr, half-Yuuzhan Vong fero xyn, bio-engineered to hunt Jedi through the Force. His cousin Anakin had died to destroy the voxyn when Ben was an infant, and he'd never thought he might encounter such animals himself. Tahiri said she still had nightmares about them sometimes.

To his surprise, he *did* feel something from the Vong fleet. It felt cold and predatory, but also distant and withdrawn...

Suddenly her presence screamed in his head. It was familiar but poisoned by bitterness and bad memories. It reached out to touch him, *him* specifically, and he could feel not surprise in it but a kind of smug satisfaction.

Vestara was aboard that ship, and she'd known he'd be here.

Vestara was working with the Yuuzhan Vong. The *Sith* were working with the Yuuzhan Vong. And they'd known Ben was coming.

A white hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him upright. He hadn't even realized that he'd staggered.

"Are you all right?" Wynssa looked at him, frowning.

Vestara's presence in his mind lasted only a moment. It withdrew again, but he knew she was out there, ready to strike again.

"No," Ben said. "I'm not all right at all."

The bridge of the Yuuzhan Vong frigate rocked under Vestara's feet as the Chiss warship returned fire, but she stood firm and focused her attention ahead.

She had thought the Rakatan vessel a bizarre creation, but the Yuuzhan Vong ship was far stranger. Its pilots sat along the walls with their faces covered in translucent masks, connected by tangled wet umbilical cords to whatever passed for the ship's brain. The crew remained in trance-like

stillness even as the Chiss scored a direct hit on their forward bow, breaking off chunks of yorik coral into space.

The only active figures were the ship's command crew, led by a broad-shouldered beast of a being two meters tall, with a mess of black tattoos sprawled over a face pocked by fresh red stab wounds that must have been self-inflicted. He was a terrifying sight as he waved his arms about and shouted orders in his incomprehensible tongue, made all the worse because he did not seem to exist in the Force at all. Finally, Vestara understood why these savage invaders had left the Jedi feeling deep existential dread. Nothing here seemed to exist, not the captain, not the crew, not even the ship around her; nothing except for Darth Vidious standing at her right shoulder.

"Did you touch him in the Force?" the Devaronian asked.

Vestara nodded. "He's aboard that Chiss vessel."

"What of the Sword? Where is she?"

"I... don't know. She's here somewhere, I think close by, but it's hard to tell things are so chaotic..."

"Yes," Vidious purred. "So many lives, locked in desperate combat. So much confusion and anger. The Vong find war exquisite, and I have to agree."

The deck rocked beneath them again as the frigate struggled to swallow all of the fire the Chiss destroyer was sending their way.

"What is the point of this?" Vestara snapped, impatient. "The other two ships aren't even attacking. Why are we *here*? We don't even know what's going on in this fight."

"We're here to sow discord, Lady Khai. We're here to help them tear each other apart."

"They were doing a fine enough job before we showed up."

"Do not tell me you are afraid of death, Lady Khai."

"I don't want to die like this. What would be the point? How would it help your master's *design*?"

Vidious hummed agreement. "You are wise beyond your years."

"Chalk it up to experience. I know when a fight's worth fighting. So do you, if your master's been at this for decades without the Jedi catching on."

"Well, I think your little friend Ben had caught on *now* hasn't he?" Vidious laid a hand on her shoulder, surprisingly gentle. "How would you feel if his ship were to vanish in a burst of flame and twisted metal before

your eyes? What would you do if you felt his life wink out? Would you wail in grief? Would you rage and strike me down?"

Vestara didn't know. She didn't want to find out. She had to admit that to herself. Ben Skywalker was... *Ben*. He was preposterous, annoying, self-righteous, and impossibly *good*. He was too selfless to ever turn Sith just like Vestara was too selfish to ever turn Jedi. She only loved him because she had stumbled on him during a time of weakness and been drawn to a life so utterly unlike the one she'd known all her existence.

A part of her still ached for a life with Ben, a life where she wasn't Sith and he wasn't Jedi and they were just *people*, free to explore life together without the weight of the galaxy pressing down on them. It was a fantasy she'd allowed herself to indulge in during their time together, just like she'd allowed fantasies of a loving, caring father,

But those fantasies would never come true. Vestara had to accept that pain and grow strong from it.

"Destroy it." She felt a single tear run cold down her cheek. "He has to die."

"Are you sure, Lady Khai?" Vidious whispered in her ear. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"No," she said. "This is what I *need*."

"And what happens when he is dead?"

With Ben dead there would be nothing; no hope, no desire, no connections to the life she'd lived up until now. Purged of all her stupid dreams, she would be an empty vessel waiting to be filled.

She turned her head to look Darth Vidious in his red-gold eyes. "When he's dead, I will be yours." The words were bitter in her mouth, but they were the truth.

Vidious took his hand off her shoulder and brushed away the tear on her cheek. She shuddered at the gentleness of his touch.

"You already are, Lady Khai. You already are."

Elscol Loro was a traitor. That should have bothered her, but it didn't.

They still weren't sure how many security officers had been killed during the escape. It was probably in the double digits, but even so, it was negligible compared to the deaths happening right now, in the frenzied

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battle outside. Still, Elscol was their captain and she should have felt guilt for, in some small way, helping bring about those deaths. Instead she felt the desire, the all-consuming *need* to finish what she'd started.

The daughter of Wedge Antilles was going home, no matter what.

That was why she kept *Phoenix's* fighters in the launch bay, even though the ship's full complement could easily overrun the coralskippers, X-wings, and *Besu'liike* outside. That was why she felt momentarily elated when a StealthX dropped an impeccable torpedo right onto the tractor beam emitter that was holding the escape pod, and why she almost cheered when the Chiss warship showed up.

Of course, Arefja was on the bridge now, and it was not her battle anymore.

Phoenix and *Valor* were trying to box in the shuttle and pound the newcomer, *Celestial*, at the same time. Torrents of laser fire from *Valor's* forward batteries and *Phoenix's* dorsal guns were pounding the Chiss vessels shields with only minimal effect, while Elscol's own ship was repeatedly rocked by barrages of Chiss fire. Every-thing threatened to change when the Yuuzhan Vong frigate moved to engage.

"Tactical! Where's that Vong ship going?" barked Arefja from his spot by the communications station. His silvery fur bristled with angry energy and his gold eyes shone from across the room. The warrior gentleman was in his element at last.

"The frigate analog is moving to engage *Celestial*," the tactical lieutenant reported.

Elscol felt her gut sink. If it turned into a three-on-one brawl, *Celestial* had no hope, and neither did Antilles and Fel.

"*Celestial* is adjusting aim," the tactical lieutenant continued. "She's taking fire off *Valor* and targeting the Vong."

"Wonderful!" Arefja growled. "Get me *Valor*!"

"Yes, sir," said the comm officer.

Elscol hurried from the tactical station over to the gunnery section. A half-dozen officers were seated at a row of consoles, speaking via headset with the turbolaser section chiefs and watching displays analyzing fire vectors. The displays showed that *Phoenix* was still firing everything it could aim at *Celestial*.

"Can we target the Vong?" she asked the closest ensign.

"I'm sorry, Captain," the young Togruta shook his head. "*Celestial* is between us and the Vong ship."

"They're going to get pounded," grunted another gunner, an old human, who'd surely fought the Vong before.

"Once it tears through the Chiss they'll come right for us," Elscol reminded him.

"Yeah, well, what do you expect us to do?"

"Captain," Elscol snapped.

"Sorry, Captain," the older gunner wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Getting tense. Look, their shields are weakening."

"The Vong have commenced firing on *Celestial*!" someone shouted from another part of the bridge.

Elscol felt trapped and desperate, but not nearly as trapped and desperate as Antilles and Fel must be right now. She leaned in close to the Togruta and asked, "Where is that shuttle?"

"Still trying to make for *Celestial*," he said. "I don't see how they can make it. They're heading right into *Valor's* firing line."

Elscol cursed aloud. Both gunners looked at her in surprise.

"We want them alive," Elscol reminded them. "Ensign, give me your headset."

"Yes, Captain!" the Togruta obeyed without hesitation. He unclipped the headset and handed it to Elscol. She took two steps away from the console and lowered her voice, making it harder to hear but still keeping close enough to watch the gunnery station readouts.

"Gunnery Section A, this is Captain Loro," she held the small microphone in front of her lips. "Do you copy?"

It took a moment for the ensign on the other side to respond. "Captain! Yes, Captain, we copy!"

"Captain, I want you to shift targets," she said. "Bring your guns twenty-five degrees starboard."

There was a short, tense pause. "Captain, that would have us—"

"I gave you an order, Ensign!" she barked, loud enough for the bridge officers to crane their heads and look.

"Yes, Captain. Sorry, Captain."

Elscol gave him a moment to relay orders to the other gunners along *Phoenix's* starboard turbolaser battery. She took another step away

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from the console to get a better look at the battle ahead. One-third of the steady stream of laserfire *Phoenix* was pouring into *Celestial* had abruptly stopped, while *Valor* continued to pound the Chiss ship with all it had.

"Ensign," she said into the headset, "Open fire!"

A second later a broadside of green plasma burst out of *Phoenix* toward the old Clone Wars destroyer. *Valor* had all its attention focused on the Chiss warship, and the shields protecting its aft section were minimal. The first volley of laser blasts sent green energy rippling across its shields. The second volley tore through entirely and began to tear through the bulkheads. One of *Valor's* engines exploded magnificently. The third turbolaser volley chewed up its starboard side, rending metal and spewing flame and debris out into space. A series of weapon emplacements along its starboard side exploded one after another. The other two engines sputtered and its other gun batteries went dead.

"Cease firing," she told the gunners. "Stop it, now."

Elscol's bridge had gone silent in shock.

Arefja whirled around. His eyes blazed and his lips pulled back to show angry canines. He shouted, "Who did it? Who fired on that ship?"

Elscol took the headset off and tossed it to the floor. She said, loud and firm, "I gave the order!"

Arefja, angry and confused, stared at her like she was a stranger. Elscol responded with a sad, calm smile. She was the same as she had always been: not an officer, not a captain, but a woman who gave no quarter to defend the things and the people she cared about.

She was still a traitor, though. She knew what happened to traitors. The anger and shock on Arefja's face faded to another kind of sadness.

He knew what happened to them too.

It had been a battle full of surprises, but Jesmin was still shocked when wave after wave of turbolaser fire from *Phoenix* ripped a gaping hole in *Valor*. A moment later, the old destroyer's guns went dead and it began to drift in space as it struggled to keep its remaining two engines online.

"This is it," Voort said in her ear. "Shuttle, make for *Celestial*."

"Already on it," the shuttle pilot replied.

Jesmin rolled her X-wing toward the Chiss vessel and saw the four blue engines of the assault shuttle blazing as it jumped toward *Celestial*. A pair of *Besu/liike* settled on either wing.

"Form up, Wraiths," Voort ordered.

"Copy Lead," Jesmin said.

It took her a moment before she was able to find Piggy's black X-wing. Trey was already in formation on the other side. The three of them gunned their engines and headed for the Chiss vessel. The Yuuzhan Vong craft and TIE fighters were still in flight, and one of the *Besu/liike* exploded under fire from a coralskipper.

Celestial was already pulling away from *Phoenix* and the Vong newcomer. Jesmin watched as the shuttle roared into its open landing bay and felt relief fill her.

"It's not over yet, Lucky Squadron," Voort said. "We've got to make it back to *Starless*."

"How is she?" Jesmin asked. Her own sector of the battle was all she'd been able to pay attention to.

"She's in a tight spot," Voort said. "Come on, gun it home!"

Jesmin followed Voort toward the blossoming explosions in the distance. Behind her, *Celestial* was breaking away and making a run for it, leaving *Phoenix* and the Vong frigate to attack each other while crippled *Valor* struggled to bring its remaining turbolasers to bear against the frigate.

Jesmin tried to put the battle's new stage out of her mind. They were almost home. All of them, almost home.

The gunship *Cerulean's* shields crumpled under another volley of laserfire from the Bothan Assault Cruiser *Dey'rylan*, and a moment later its rear engine block burst apart in a massive explosion that rippled through its forward section, tearing apart the hull and flushing oxygen, equipment, and people into the void.

Syal felt a pain in her gut at the thought of so many lives lost, and tried to refocus her attention on the tactical holo. *Celestial*, with Myri and Fel aboard, was making a run in *Starless's* direction, leaving *Phoenix* and *Valor* to fight with the Yuuzhan Vong frigate.

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Starless, however, was boxed in by the three Bothan Assault Cruisers. Both gunships had been destroyed, her shields were almost gone, her fighter wing was decimated, and an old renegade *Victory*-class destroyer, *Revolutionary*, was on its way to assist with the killing blow.

Worse, *Celestial* would never get there in time.

Syal looked beside her and saw Admiral Kre'fey staring at the holo intently. She asked him, "Do you trust me?"

Kre'fey's fur rippled and he gave her a quizzical look. "Do you have a plan?"

Syal nodded. "It's going to be messy."

Starless rocked under the latest volley from *Koth Melan*. Both of them clung to the console to keep from being thrown off their feet.

"Captain," one of her officers reported, "We just lost port-aft shields."

Syal spun toward the gunnery station. Another volley rocked the bridge when she was mid-stride and she had to grab a console to keep from falling to the deck.

"Damage report!" She said as she staggered over to the nearest targeting station and grabbed the back of the gunner's chair with both hands.

"Captain, we have hull breaches on Deck B12 through B16," someone reported.

"Forward shields are almost down," said another.

Syal didn't bother telling them to seal off the damaged decks. Bulkheads would have automatically lowered around the compromised portions, preventing more oxygen loss but also dooming the crew in those sections to death in the vacuum, assuming they hadn't been vaporized in the initial blast.

Syal leaned over the shoulder of the gunnery ensign and said, loud enough for the entire crew section to hear, "I want all guns to concentrate forward fire on *Melan*, Repeat, all guns on *Melan*."

"All of them, Captain?" the ensign looked up at her. "*Dey'rylan* and *Fey'lya* are also in firing range, and our shields--"

"I know about our shields," Syal said, and right on cue the bridge was rocked again. Behind her, officers started reporting more hull breaches. "We're going to blow a hole through their line. Put everything you've got into the *Melan*."

It was a desperate strategy, but the ensigns didn't have to be reminded of their dire straits. They relayed orders to the section commanders, and a moment later *Starless* began to pound the nearest Bothan Assault Cruiser with everything it had.

The *Koth Melan* was a smaller ship, but it made up for lack of size with strong shields and armament. Its narrow body presented a smaller target, and most of *Starless's* turbolaser blasts pounded its forward section. The ship stopped firing in return and put all power to forward shields, hoping to wait out *Starless's* barrage while the other two Bothan cruisers took *Starless* on its flanks and pounded its exposed broadsides.

Instead of rocking with explosions, the bridge reverberated with the distant thunder of the blazing turbolaser cannons. Syal went over to the tactical holo, where Kre'fey was still clinging by the tips of his claws.

"They'll be on us soon," he said. "We won't be able to defend both flanks. We're still venting atmosphere from the starboard side."

"We won't need to," Syal stared past the holo at the forward viewport, where a storm of green danced across *Melan's* shields and lit up space. The cruiser was strained to the limit.

"Captain," the comm officer said, "Transmission from Wraith Leader."

"Put him on," she said.

Voort's mechanical voice sounded especially harsh and static as his transmission broke through. "*Starless*, I've got six StealthX and four Bessies coming in. Can we help?"

He didn't ask if they should turn around and head for *Celestial*. Uncle Piggy had more faith in her than that. Alternatively, he was faking it, but Syal didn't care one way or the other right now.

"Target *Koth Melan's* engines," she said. "Their aft shields should be down."

"Will do. Piggy out."

The transmission cut off. Syal held her breath and waited and watched the tactical holo as ten green flecks of light came up behind the red block of *Melan*.

Ten fighters was less than a full squadron, but ten pairs of proton torpedoes was enough. Explosions shuddered through *Melan's* hull, causing its shields to falter. *Starless's* volley punched through the cruiser's forward section, tearing apart its bridge. The destroyer continued to fire, chewing

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through *Melan's* hull until it reached the hangar bay and missile clusters. The detonation was so bright Syal had to look away from the viewport.

The crew broke into cheers. A few even hugged. *Melan's* smoldering remains broke apart and began to drift. *Fey'lya* and *Dey'rylan* held their positions outside firing range, uncertain.

"This is Wraith Lead," Voort's voice crackled. "Mission accomplished. We're coming home."

"Great job," Syal slammed a fist on the console. "Helm, wait until those fighters are aboard, then gun it. Get us out of the nebula."

"Captain," tactical reported, "*Celestial* is on its way out too."

"Great news. Comm, relay the fallback coordinates to *Celestial*."

"Yes, Captain."

Syal looked to Kre'fey and saw the old Bothan's fur standing on end. His violet eyes found hers and, amazingly, he gave a little laugh.

"Goodness," he said, "I'd forgotten how exciting this could be."

Exciting, yes. Terrifying and nerve-wracking too. Syal told him, "Once we hit the fallback point I'll contact *Celestial* and talk to Fel. We'll see how he wants to handle it."

Kre'fey nodded, eyes still bright. Syal felt gravity settle over her. They'd won the battle, and her sister was back from the dead, and it almost felt like redemption. But unlike Kre'fey, Syal knew what secret *Celestial* had locked up in its lab.

They weren't ready to go to Zonama Sekot, not yet.

Chapter 18

For Vestara, it was a relief to set foot on *Revenge* again. The ancient Rakatan vessel, dead yet alive, faintly pulsing with Dark Side energy infused by its mysterious creators thousands of years ago, was still welcome compared to the yawning emptiness of the Yuuzhan Vong frigate.

She hardly felt triumphant. After the Chiss vessel escaped, with both Ben Skywalker *and* the Sword of the Jedi onboard, it had felt like crushing defeat. The Yuuzhan Vong captain had certainly seemed displeased, both at the loss of their quarry and at giving the order to fall back and leave the renegade fleet to lick its wounds. Vestara herself had felt exhausted; she'd done little physically during the battle, but emotionally it had forced her to confront the hard truth of her life.

Ben Skywalker, whatever he'd been to her before, was now a disease that muddled her thoughts and hurt her judgment. He had to be removed, permanently. It would hurt her, probably more than anything in her entire life, but the alternative was to live with the tantalizing, aching hope of another life. Hope made you weak. Pain made you strong. She had to drill that into her mind, body, and soul, because anything would lead to her destruction.

Curiously, Darth Vidious seemed perfectly content with the outcome of the battle. The Devaronian led Vestara back to the Rakatan vessel, which still sat at the heart of the vast Yuuzhan Vong fleet. Ship, detached from *Revenge*, hovered patiently to one side, like a nek dog shadowing its owner. Vestara tried to reach out and touch the mediation sphere with the Force but found it unresponsive. In a way, she would have welcomed Ship's presence in her mind. It would at least have meant something familiar when she was heading deeper and deeper into the unknown.

When Vidious and Vestara boarded *Revenge*, she was surprised to find beings waiting for them this time. Darth Wyyrlok was in front, still in black robes, with his hands carefully folded in front of him. To one side was Darth Nether, and to the other was a humanoid woman Vestara had not seen before. She seemed curiously ageless, with short black hair, sunken silver eyes, and tanned skin marked by thin dark tattoos instead of the red-and-black ones the others had. Apparently that meant she was not a Sith Lord, but one of their servants. Vestara supposed she was now in that category as well.

"A welcoming party," Vidious said. "I feel honored."

"How went the battle?" Wyyrlok asked.

Vidious glanced back at Vestara. "I was pleased with the outcome."

Vestara had no idea why he would be, but Wyyrlok nodded in acceptance. He said, "Come. I have made a decision."

Vidious didn't ask what that decision pertained to, so neither did Vestara. She had more questions than ever but she wordlessly followed these people, her new tribe, down the hallway. It looked like every other one winding through *Revenge* and she wondered how the ancient Rakata used to avoid getting lost in their own vessels.

Wyyrlok led them into a chamber unlike anything she'd seen before. Luminous trails- blood vessels, nerve clusters, whatever they were- were pulsing beneath the skin of the walls and ceiling like never before. A collection of boxy metallic consoles had been installed in the center of the room and were clearly of contemporary design. Likewise, several large upright durasteel storage containers were mounted in one corner of the room.

"What is this place?" Vestara asked. She couldn't take the cryptic treatment anymore.

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The woman looked at Vestara and said, "This is our laboratory."

"Okay," Vestara looked around. She was no scientist, and she couldn't make sense of any of the consoles or instruments. "But what is it *for*?"

"She is impatient," she looked to Vidious, like he was Vestara's keeper. In a way he was.

"I'd call it *eager*," the Devaronian replied.

"Lord Vidious feels you have conducted yourself well," Wyyrlok said. He looked at Vestara and it took all her effort not to shrink from his gaze. "I believe things are coming to a head. There will be an opportunity for you to prove yourself further. We will, of course, kill you at the first sign of betrayal or weakness."

"Of course," Vestara echoed.

Wyyrlok moved for a sealed circular hatch on the far side of the room. The others followed wordlessly. Wyyrlok stood in front of the hatch, reached out, and pressed his palm against its center. Vestara felt him reach out with the Force, *commanding* the door to open. It split apart like a widening iris and he stepped through. The others followed, Vidious and Vestara last.

She didn't know what she'd been expecting, but she was surprised by what she saw. The chamber was much smaller than the one before, and the lights from the walls dimmer. The Sith spread in a circle around what appeared to be a coffin in the center of the room, though on closer inspection Vestara recognized the pod's rough sides and translucent, gem-like top cover. She'd seen much the same technology on the Yuuzhan Vong frigate just an hour ago.

"It's Yuuzhan Vong," she looked around. "Why do you have Yuuzhan Vong technology on this ship?"

Wyyrlok rested a hand on the smooth cover. "*This* is our leader."

"Your *leader*?" Vestara's jaw dropped. Their leader, their Sith Master, was a Yuuzhan Vong? It didn't make sense.

Wyyrlok shook his head. "Perhaps you should explain, Dician."

The woman nodded and looked at Vestara from the far side of the coffin, or whatever the strange device was. She said, "Darth Krayt is not Yuuzhan Vong but human. However, he suffered captivity under the Yuuzhan Vong for many years. Their armor has been fused with his body and they have become symbiotic with each other."

"And he's here, in this... thing." Vestara stared down. She could vaguely make out a humanoid form through the amber-toned lid. It was tall, broad-shouldered, but she could not see its face. "Is he... alive?"

"He spent many years in here, dreaming," Wyyrlok intoned. "Frozen in stasis, never aging, never letting the Yuuzhan Vong biotechnology consume his real body, though any being weaker in the Force would have been lost a long time ago."

"And you've been... the leader in his stead?"

"Darth Krayt speaks to me through the Force," the Chagrian fixed Vestara with another gold stare.

"Darth Krayt appointed Lord Wyyrlok to speak for him in his absence," Dician said. "We have been researching and scouring the galaxy for a way to save our master from the armor that threatens to steal his life."

"Is that why you brought him here? Are you trying to find a cure, free him from this... armor stuff?"

"In part," Dician said.

She glanced at Wyyrlok. The Chagrian reached out and placed his hand on the surface of the coffin lid. Vestara felt another punch of dark side energy, stronger than before.

Then the lid started to open, and Vestara staggered back, overwhelmed by the presence waking in the Force. *This* was what she'd felt on first arrival. *This* was the quasar of Sith power that had drawn Ship from so far away, had drowned out all her other Force sensations.

She was so stunned she could barely speak. "You... you said he was in stasis... He was dreaming..."

"Not dreaming anymore," said Wyyrlok. He almost smiled. "Just sleeping. And now he wakes up."

The stench of rotting flesh filled Vestara's nostrils. She felt like gagging but pulled herself upright and braced herself for whatever came out of that coffin, no matter how powerful or horrible or amazing it was.

Dician said, casually, like she'd seen this whole thing before, "Darth Krayt suddenly awoke from his slumber nearly two years ago. He fought a great battle but was grievously wounded. We first sought out the Yuuzhan Vong looking for ways to *heal* him."

The gem-like lid continued to slide open, apparently of its own accord. It scraped loudly across the rim of the coffin. Vestara took a hesitant step

closer, and saw an arm and a leg, perhaps human, but covered in rough, spiky armor like what she'd seen on the Yuuzhan Vong warriors.

"It was a perilous agreement. The Yuuzhan Vong shapers trusted us as much as we trusted them," Dician continued. "Nonetheless, their ministrations have been essential for healing the damage Abeloth did to our leader."

"Abeloth!" Vestara's eyes went wide. "You mean Krayt... He helped Luke Skywalker defeat Abeloth?"

"It was necessary, but in doing so he alerted the Jedi to our presence earlier than intended," Wyyrlok said.

"The time for waiting is over," Darth Vidious spoke up. "The time to *act* has come."

"But... Act how?"

Vestara couldn't take her eyes off the body appearing before her. The lid had slid back far enough to reveal the face of an old man, dry and lined laced with dark tattoos. Strands of gray hair were gathered to a ponytail that rested on one armored shoulder. The eyes were closed and the face looked almost peaceful, save for lines of concentration around the mouth and forehead.

And she could feel, clearer than ever, the incredible Force power reverberating from this man.

"The Jedi are likely to find Zonama Sekot soon enough," Darth Nether spoke up.

The Yuuzhan Vong's adopted homeworld, Vestara thought, but she couldn't say anything. She felt like she'd lost all capacity for speech.

"Our Yuuzhan Vong allies have broken away from Zonama Sekot, and while they still know the location of the living planet, they are loath to attack it directly," said Vidious. "Thankfully, we have no such compunction."

"Zonama Sekot is more than able to defend itself," Wyyrlok said. "We are, in fact, counting on that. It has shown reluctance to indulge its aggressive nature in the past, but we believe things will go differently this time."

"Imagine," Vidious said hungrily, "An entire sentient *world*, a giant vessel of Force energy with imaginable power... turned to the dark side of the Force."

The thought was staggering. Revelation after revelation was too much for Vestara. She keeled forward and caught herself on the rim of the coffin just as the lid finally pulled back too far and toppled nosily to the floor. The other Sith leaned close eagerly.

"Once the Yuuzhan Vong and a dark side world are unleashed upon the galaxy, the Jedi Order and the Alliance will be doomed," Wyyrlok said. "Finally, *we* will be the ones to bring order."

Vestara watched as the man, Darth Krayt, master of the One Sith, stirred to life. His shoulders flexed, scraping spiky armor against the rough interior of the coffin. Breath blew out of his nose and mouth. His torso swung upright. For a long moment he sat in the middle of them, breathing steadily, eyelids closed. Save for the intense power he radiated and the grotesque Yuuzhan Vong armor encasing his body, he looked like a tired old man.

Then he opened his eyes.

One blazed a bright red, like those of Wyyrlok and Vidious. The other was icy cold, with a jagged iris and a pupil like a black well. Both of them were fixed directly on Vestara.

The old man opened his mouth. "Who are you, child?"

His voice was low and rasping, but it held ummistake-able strength.

"My name is Vestara Khai," she swallowed. "I am... your servant, Lord Krayt."

His eyes held hers and he nodded, like he could see into the depths of her soul and understand her very being better than she understood herself. Perhaps he really could. Vestara dared not break his gaze.

She felt like she was staring into the eyes of a dragon.

Chapter 19

Jagged Fel put on a brave face, but looking at him broke her heart.

He'd spent an hour in *Celestials* medical bay, and the doctors there had given him a new cast for his broken hand a sling to put the arm in. They'd put a slim white cast with bacta fluid around the burn scars on his other arm. There was, however, little they could do for his eye at the moment. The best they could manage was to clean up the wound and give him an eyepatch. It was a round black cup of fabric, held in place by a thin band around his head.

Jag stood in front of the mirror in his private room for a long time. Jaina was behind him, hand on the shoulder of the plain black jumpsuit he had changed into. She didn't know what to tell him.

He surprised her by saying, in a dry voice, "I've lived a charmed life."

"What do you mean?"

"Most of my siblings are dead. My last sister is a stranger to me. I haven't seen my parents in a decade."

Jaina frowned. Jagged wasn't a man who dwelled on his hurt. Like her, he had plenty he could wallow in, but like her he tried to push it all away and hide it from others, and himself.

Jag reached up and traced his fingers lightly over the rim of his eyepatch. "I wonder what my father would say if he could see me now."

She attempted a joke. "You could compare patches. See whose is more stylish."

Jag didn't smile. "It was always duty with my father. Duty and blood and honor. And *service*. That was his favorite word, actually. He was never a man to show off his feelings, which is why he adjusted so well into Chiss society. My mother... had a more difficult time."

Jag swallowed and turned away from the mirror. He took each of Jaina's hands in his own. "My father lost so much. Suffered so much. He could never hide his scars, just work around them." He gave her hands a squeeze. "Mother gave him strength. After everything they went through, she always gave him strength."

Jaina blinked dampness from her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Jag."

"Don't be." He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. "You're the only thing I need."

He stepped back and let go of her hands. He pulled his jumpsuit, tugging out the wrinkles, then looked at the door. "Come. My sister is waiting."

"Do you want to talk with her alone?"

"No. We're both a part of this."

When they talked out of the room two Chiss were waiting for them. The guards gave slight bows, and wordlessly led them down the halls. After two turns and a brief turbolift ride, they entered a small conference room. Wynssa Fel was seated alone at the far end of the circular table.

She didn't rise to greet them. "Please," she said, "Sit."

Jagged sat on her right, Jaina on her left. The blond woman's eyes flicked from brother to sister-in-law to brother again. She said, "I'm sorry we have no replacement for your eye. Our medical services for humans are very limited."

"It's all right," Jag said. "Thank you for the rescue."

"Ben Skywalker had a hand in that," Wynssa said without smiling. "He can be convincing, even without Jedi mind tricks."

"Where is Ben now?" Jaina asked. She could feel him in the Force, somewhere aboard the ship, but his presence was distant. It was almost like he was avoiding her, though she had no idea why.

"Jedi Skywalker is in his quarters." Wynssa placed her folded hand on the tabletop and looked back to Jagged. "We have other things to discuss."

"We do," Jagged said. He licked his cracked lips and leaned in a little closer. "However, it's not going to go how you think."

"It's not?" Wynssa raised a blond eyebrow. "Tell me Commander, how do I think?"

"You think this is going to be an ugly confrontation about Alpha Red." Jag said plainly. Wynssa didn't flinch, but Jaina could sense her conflicted emotions. "You think I'm going to demand you turn it over or launch it into a star, otherwise I'll never let you come with us to Zonama Sekot. And you, I assume, have been given strict orders about what to do with that bioweapon in your lab, and you aren't going to let me countermand them. And we're going to end up with a very ugly standoff, *Celestial* versus *Starless*, which you'd probably win, given the damage the latter just took."

Wynssa didn't deny it. "How is it *actually* going to go then?"

"I'm going to make a deal. I'm going to let you keep Alpha Red on this ship, in exchange for two things."

Wynssa's face showed her surprise. "What are those two things?"

Jag held up one finger. "First, I am going to require your word, as an officer *and* as my sister, that you will not use Alpha Red without consulting with me first."

"You would permit the use of the bioweapon?" Wynssa said it to Jag but glanced at Jaina, like she expected the Jedi to be her husband's pocket conscience.

"In a very extreme situation, I might," Jag said honestly. He still had a bit of that Chiss and Imperial hardness in him. "However, if you attempt to use Alpha Red *without* my agreement, I will throw everything I have at this ship. Do you understand?"

"I believe you," Wynssa said. She might also believe that her own death was a small price to pay for wiping out the Vong; Jaina couldn't tell one way or the other. "What is your other request?"

Jag held up his second finger. "Those Mandalorians rescued me because I promised them that you would create an antidote for the gene-targeted nanovirus that has poisoned Mandalore's atmosphere."

Jaina had heard this before, but Wynssa was unable to contain her surprise. Before she could object Jag pressed, "If it weren't for Fett's people I would be dead. Father taught us to keep our promises, Wyn."

"What do you want me to do exactly?" Wynssa scowled. "Our laboratory's capabilities are limited."

"But the ones in Chiss space aren't," Jag pressed. "It doesn't have to be to Csilla. There are research stations on the outer planets that could serve. Fett already has all the information that was used to create the nanovirus. He has all the parameters your scientists would need to create an antidote."

"There may not *be* an antidote," Wynssa insisted. "The virus may have mutated by now. You shouldn't have guaranteed him anything."

"I told him your scientists are the best bio-engineers in the galaxy. Am I wrong?"

Wynssa's frown grew deeper. "Do you expect me to take *Celestial* back to Chiss space?"

"You can send a team in a shuttle. I'd like you to come with us to Zonama Sekot."

Wynssa's frown faltered. She asked Jaina, "What do you think will happen if I refuse to send Fett to Chiss space?"

"Well, you've got about thirty armed and armed Mandos on board. You know what they did to *Phoenix* and *Chimacra*."

Wynssa sighed. "Very well. We'll find their antidote."

"And Alpha Red?" Jag asked expectantly.

"I will consult with you before use."

"Very good," Jag reached a hand across the table. "Thank you again Commodore."

Wynssa regarded her brother's hand for a long time before she finally shook. Jaina didn't sense much warmth from either of them, but she did feel a reluctant, almost begrudging trust. It was good enough. She didn't want to see any more brothers and sisters torn apart.

After leaving the conference room, the guards led them to the medical center, where Jag was set to have his bacta cast replaced. As her husband went off to see the doctor, Jaina slipped into the wing where a dozen beds lined the walls, separated by thin white curtains. The Chiss had agreed to treat several Mandalorians injured in the battle, and it didn't take any effort to find the bed where Venku lay.

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Jaina had never seen him without his armor. He looked more than vulnerable in his white hospital dress. The doctors had stitched the wound to his head but he still lay unmoving, eyes closed. His chest moved very little and his vital signs ran slowly across the scanners attached to his bed.

Gotab stood on one side, two more Mandalorians on the other. They all wore armor but none of them had any helmets; probably the Chiss had insisted that no masked Mandos be allowed outside the hangar bay. Jaina was first struck by how *old* they all were; Venku himself was about her mother's age, but these three looked ancient, with sagged wrinkled faces and gray hair turning white.

One of them looked like Boba Fett, only with a few more laugh lines around the mouth and eyes, and she realized he must have been another one of the original clone troopers. The other clone, Mereel, had half his face hidden by his tangled white beard and the long braided hair that half-hung in front of his bowed head.

"How is he?" Jaina asked softly.

All three old men looked up, like they hadn't realized she was there. Gotab blinked and said, "Not good."

"What happened?" Jaina leaned forward and looked into Venku's pale, inert face. She tried to reach out with the Force, and while she could dimly sense his life energy she found nothing that had marked him in life.

"The doctors can't figure it out," Mereel said. "They say it's like a concussion, but..."

"You're a healer," Jaina looked at Gotab. "What do you think?"

"I think..." Gotab's face darkened in a heavy frown. "I think I've seen this before."

"Seen what before?"

"It's like what happened to Fi," the clean-shaven clone said. "You saved him then."

"I know," Gotab scowled. "But it's... different this time. I can feel him in there, with the Force. Not just life energy, but *him*. He's buried so deep in his own mind I can't pull him out." The old man looked at his hands as they clenched the side of the bed. "It's been so long since I did this... Maybe I'm getting old. Losing it."

"Happens to all of us, *Bard'ika*," Mereel said softly.

"The Force isn't like physical prowess," Jaina insisted. "It doesn't wither with age. At least... I don't think so."

"I can't go all Yoda on him," Gotab shook his head. "I was never that strong. I went years without even touch-ing on the Force at all. And now..."

He trailed off and lowered his head. Jaina could see it on the faces of all three old men, feel it in the Force: sadness compounded by time and age, a bone-deep weariness, an awful doubt whether everything they'd gone through for nearly a century was ever worth a damn.

"Come with us," Jaina said. "Come with us to Zonama Sekot."

"What?" Mereel looked skeptical. "That magic Force-planet with all the *Vongesse*?"

"I just talked to Commodore Fel," Jaina said. "She agreed to take Fett to Chiss space. You'll get your antidote."

For a moment relief showed on the faces of all three men. Then they looked down at the shell that was their *Kad'ika* and the heaviness settled back into their expressions.

"If you want Venku to see Mandalore again, then take him to Zonama Sekot," Jaina leaned close to Gotab. "Believe me, I've *been* there. The Force sings through every part of that planet. Everything is alive. It's like nothing you've ever felt. If you need to touch deeper into the Force to heal Venku, you can find it there."

She could feel hope warring with doubt, and something else. It was like the old man was scared, of what she didn't know. He asked, "Do you know that? Do you know for sure?"

"No," she admitted. "I also don't know that the Chiss can get you your antidote, but they're your best bet for that, too." She reached out and laid a small, smooth palm on Gotab's gnarled hand. "Please. If you want him to see Mandalore again, if you want to go back *as a family*, then you have to trust me."

Gotab was still reluctant. "I've heard stories about this planet. I've heard it chooses who it lets on and doesn't."

"You're trying to save a life," Jaina said. "It would never refuse you."

Gotab swallowed. The apple bobbed in the wrinkled skin of his neck. He licked dry lips and said, "Okay. Okay, I'll give it a shot."

"I'll come with you, *Bard'ika*," Mereel said. "You'll need someone to watch your back."

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"If the planet lets a *shabuir* like you on," the shaved clone said. "But you're welcome to try. I think I should go with Fett. Somebody needs to keep an eye on him."

"That's good, Jaing, Thank you." Gotab looked at Jaina. "And thank you too, *ad'ika*."

Jaina saw the wet gleam in the old man's eyes and all she could do was nod.

After the Chiss and Alliance ships escaped, the battle in the nebula ended quickly. The Yuuzhan Vong ships, which had been quick to ambush ships already pitted against each other, decided they did not want to stay and fight a larger, unified fleet. The frigates recalled their coralskippers and beat a hasty retreat, though not before *Niathal* and *Lacentra* were able to deal some hefty damage to one of them.

That left the renegade fleet alone in the heart of the nebula, just as they'd been before the battle again. This time, however, they were short a handful of important prisoners. Just as bad, *Valor* was damaged beyond repair, *Melan* was utterly destroyed, and *Phoenix* and *Lacentra* had both taken considerable damage fighting the Vong.

Chimaera was only able to get its internal and external communication systems online after the battle was over. For the next several hours, her crew was busy catching up on everything they'd missed. Casualty lists came in from the damaged ships while the *Chimaera's* gunnery, hangar, and engineering crews double- and triple-checked to make sure all their systems were working properly after the Mandalorian sabotage.

After finally getting a new pair of boots, Fy'lyor did the best she could to help the repairs. *Chimaera* was an old ship, but most of her systems had been updated and refitted since her creation. As a result, she was an engineer's dream and a captain's nightmare. Nonetheless, the old ship had many things in common with *Justifier*, despite their differences in age and class, and Fy'lyor found that knowledge of her newer ship gave her an advantage when learning about this old one.

She threw herself into the repair work, because she needed something to do. She had to take her mind off the disaster of the previous battle, and

supervising gunnery teams and analyzing the atmosphere generators was a good way to do it.

She was down in the auxiliary hangar, supervising the clean-up crews when Daala found her. Fy'lyor didn't notice when the Admiral walked into the hangar. The place was a mess of dust and debris, and construction machinery had been brought up from storage to move the tangled, twisted catwalks that had been ripped out of the walls and thrown down on the deck. Fy'lyor was shouting instructions at the machine operator when Daala's black-gloved hand slapped down on her shoulder.

Fy'lyor nearly jumped in surprise. She stifled her shock and snapped a salute. She was relieved to see a faint smile on Daala's face. After all that had happened, she half-expected Daala to be in a homicidal mood.

"Clean-up is proceeding, Admiral," Fy'lyor reported without being prompted. "The Mandalorians did a good deal of damage. It might be several days before we're able to get the auxiliary hangar operational."

"I'm glad you're getting into your work, Lieutenant Colonel," Daala said. Her one eye darted around the miserable scene. Fy'lyor thought she saw pain on Daala's face, a deeper pain than a captain seeing her ship damaged. She looked like was contemplating a personal hurt, a deep betrayal.

Daala told her, "You've comported yourself admirably so far. I'm going to depend on you more in the future."

"Depend how, Admiral?" Fy'lyor asked. Her hand was still flat against her forehead and she was too nervous to take it down.

"As you know, Captain Remal was killed here," Daala took in the ruined hangar with one hand. "As a result, *Chimaera* is in need of a new captain. I would greatly like that captain to be you."

Fy'lyor's hand fell. So did her jaw. "Admiral, I... I don't think I'm *ready*."

"You've commanded your own star destroyer before, a bigger one than this," Daala pointed out. "You've clearly proven yourself familiar with their operations."

"I lost that star destroyer, Admiral." She didn't have to say *I lost it to you*.

Daala was unphased. "You were surprised by, shall we say, unorthodox tactics."

"Admiral, this ship is different. It's... *this* ship."

Daala smiled faintly. "Take it from someone who knew him, Lieutenant Colonel. Gil Pellaeon did not think of *Chimaera* with a sense of awe, not

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when he was serving under Grand Admiral Thrawn, not when he was fighting off the Vong at Bastion. Gil Pellaeon put his doubts, worries, and ego aside and he *did his job*. The Empire needs more people who know how to do their jobs. I believe you are one of them."

She extended a hand. Fy'lyor stared at it, unmoving. It seemed impossible to move her own against the weight of so much newfound responsibility.

"Make your choice, *Captain*," Daala said. "Will you give the Empire what it needs?"

Fy'lyor's whole life- training, academy, intel work, fleet command- had all been a resounding *yes* to that question. Staring at the old woman's black-gloved hand, she realized that just as Daala would always be Daala, so Fy'lyor would always be Fy'lyor.

She clasped the black glove with her own red hand and shook it hard.

"I'm glad to have you, Captain," Daala said. "Now come. We have much to prepare."

Daala moved for the exit, and Fy'lyor followed. She asked, "What do we do now? What *can* we do? They've taken back Fel and Solo. They've destroyed two of our ships."

"Don't worry, Captain," the old woman smiled. "I always have a plan."

After leaving the Mandalorians and checking in on Jag, Jaina decided to try and find Ben. She got a Chiss guard to escort her to the very same cabin where she had spent a few awkward nights. It was less than two days ago but seemed like far, far longer. She rang the buzzer on the door and waited. It took a full thirty seconds before it slid open.

Ben was standing there, arms crossed over his chest. He smiled when he saw Jaina, but it seemed more dutiful than enthusiastic.

"Hey," Jaina said, feeling suddenly awkward. "Good to see you. Can I come in?"

"Sure," Ben said. He turned his back to her, walked over to the small dining table, and sat down on one of the seats. Jaina took the other. The door closed, sealing the Chiss guard outside and leaving them alone.

"I just talked with Jag and Wynssa," she explained. "We're going ahead to Zonoma Sekot, minus the Mandalorians who want the antidote Jag promised."

Ben didn't seem to care. He was guarding his feelings, both on his face and in the Force. He said, "Jaina, during the battle I felt something in the Force. I felt *Sith*."

Jaina stiffened. During the chaos of the fight she hadn't felt anything but adrenaline. "Where? On one of Daala's ships, or the-"

"The Vong," Ben said. "There were Sith on the Yuuzhan Vong frigate."

Jaina felt chilled. After encountering the voxyn on Yavin 4, some kind of alliance between the Sith and the Vong had been suggested, but it seemed too unlikely, and too horrible, to take for fact.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "I mean, the Vong seem to hate *all* Force-users."

"I felt *Vestara*," Ben said.

Oh. Oh, that was it.

"She reached out and touched me," Ben said. "Some-how she knew I was going to be there. She was *expecting* me."

"Ben, that's not... possible." His eyes blazed with anger and muffled pain. She couldn't meet them.

"Jaina, have you seen Vestara before? Was she on Yavin 4?"

She looked at the table and nodded. "Your father and I agreed not to tell you. We thought-

"You didn't think," Ben pounded a fist on the table. "You *lied* to me."

"Listen Ben, we didn't know she was going to be here," Jaina insisted.

"You knew the Sith were involved in this, somehow. You knew *Vestara* was, and you kept that from me because you didn't think I could handle it."

"We did. And I'm sorry, Ben. But you have to believe we had good intentions-"

"Save it." Ben said. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, forestalling any further conversation. "I'm done."

"Ben, we-

"I don't want to talk about it anymore. Maybe later, but not now."

Jaina got to her feet. She wanted to tell Ben she was sorry, that she was trying to keep him from hurting, that she didn't want to cause him alarm

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until she was sure Vestara was involved in their mission. But she knew he'd scoff at all those reasons, as he should.

Keeping secrets and telling comfortable lies had done their family far too much damage already.

"We should have told you," Jaina admitted weakly, and stepped out of the room.

The last thing she wanted to see right now was a red-eyed Chiss staring blankly at her. She restrained a sigh when her escort asked where she wanted to go now.

She had talked to Jagged and Wyn, Gotab and the old Mandos, and finally her cousin. There was one last person Jaina knew she should see. She didn't want to see him, but she knew she had to, just once, before he left.

"Take me to the hangar," she said.

"Very good," said the guard. "Follow me."

When she got to her destination it was not difficult to find Boba Fett, even though the place was filled with Mandalorians in full armor milling around outside the parked assault shuttle. There were Chiss guards around the perimeter and patrolling the overhead catwalks, and though their faces were as stoic as ever Jaina could feel their tension in the Force. They didn't like unexpected guests in general, and almost thirty tough Mandos with armor and guns in tow were pretty much the worst thing imaginable. For once, Jaina felt sorry for them.

She wasn't sure what she felt about Boba Fett. As always, he stood a man apart. While most of the Mandos had pulled up crates to sit on and were gathered in a loose circle at the center of the hangar, Fett stood on the shuttle's landing ramp, arms crossed over his chest. He didn't react as Jaina walked toward him, nor when she went halfway up the ramp to stand at his side. He just continued to watch the gathering of raucous mercenaries through the mirror-dark visor of his helmet.

When it became clear she wasn't going to get even a perfunctory greeting, she said, "I heard you got shot."

"Just above the *shebs*," Fett grunted. "Armor took most of the damage."

Jaina didn't know if she wanted to berate Fett for hurting Jag or thank him for saving him. She figured it wouldn't do much either way. Fett may have had feelings, but like his face he kept them hidden beneath heavy armor, where nobody could see them, touch them or hurt them. It seemed

a miserable way to spend a life. There had been times, especially after her brothers' deaths, when Jaina had emotionally shut out everything and trudged through days trying not to care about anyone. But in the end, she always got sick of being alone. Luckily for her, she had her parents, her husband, and good friends to come back to.

Boba Fett, by his own stubborn insistence, had none of that.

"How's Mirta?" she asked.

Fett looked in her direction, finally. His black visor stared at her for a long time before he said, "I'll let you know when I see her."

"When *have* you seen her?" Jaina asked. "Has it been since Jacen died?"

"I don't think so."

Four years, then, since he'd seen the person most important to him. In that, at least, he and Jaina had some-thing in common.

Fett looked back at the circle of Mandos but he didn't speak.

"They're your people. You could join them if you wanted," she pointed out, though she knew he never would.

"They're not my people."

"Well, I'm pretty sure you are still *Mand'alor*, so yeah, they're your people."

"Venku's the one they really care about," Fett said.

"Well, Venku's in a coma. I talked to *Bard'ika*. He's going to take him down to Zonama Sekot and try to heal him there."

"Jaina already told me. A lot of them want to stay with him, but I'll try to bring as many as I can along with me."

"You want to show off for the Chiss?"

"I want to make sure they give us what we want."

"Well, I'm sure a bunch of Mandos staring down their backs will get them working hard."

"It had better."

Jaina smiled sadly. "You really do want to go back to Mandalore, don't you? Even though they're not your people?"

Fett didn't reply, didn't budge.

"Do you want to go back for you? Or do you want to help Mirta go home?"

"I didn't know they taught psychology in Jedi school."

"You're not that hard to read, Fett."

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"Really?" he tilted his helmet toward her. "Is it all over my face?"

"Don't deny it. I know you better than you think I do."

He regarded her for a long moment, then looked away. "I'm an old man and I don't want to die alone. It's not complicated."

"It's very... human."

Fett didn't budge. Jaina sighed and walked to the base of the landing ramp. She looked back at Fett, still stubbornly watching other people enjoy life.

"I hope you find what you're looking for. For Mirta's sake."

He didn't respond, but she hadn't been expecting him to. Jaina walked back toward the hangar exit and was midway across when someone called at her, "Hey *Jeti! Jeti!* Get your pretty little *shebs* over here!"

Jaina looked over her shoulder to see a gray-haired, tattooed Mandalorian in deep violet armor sharing a crate with the long-bearded clone. Both had little silver cups in hand.

"Hey, want a *buy'ce ga!*" Baltan Carid raised a bottle with his other hand.

Jaina shook her head. "Did you bring that with you when you broke out of *Chimaera*?"

"Well, it's not like these blue boys have any good spirits," The clone said.

"Don't blame a man for having his priorities straight," Mereel added.

A Mando woman with long dark hair clapped him on the shoulder. "Hey *ba'buir*, tell me that story again."

"Oh yeah," Carid said, "I heard you-"

"-Shot that *shab'buir* Lecersen," Mereel grinned proudly. "And to think, yesterday I was feeling old. Nothing like cleaning the galaxy of some slimy Imp *chakaare* to make you feel young again."

Jaina sighed, glanced at the hangar exit, then at the Mandos. Mereel started to tell his tale, and Carid poured himself more ale. Jaina decided to enjoy life for a little while longer. You never knew how much you had left.

Elscol Loro sat on the bench, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees and her hands clasped calmly together. Bren Arefja was on the chair in front of her, with a posture mirroring her own.

"Maybe I was wrong to bring you on this mission," he said. "At least, wrong to give you this responsibility. You were always more a fighter than a leader, Elscol."

"I've led people," she amended. "But they usually ended up dead."

"Quite so." Aref'ja's mouth seemed to sag downward in imitation of a human frown. His silver fur stood on end, betraying the tension he tried to keep from showing.

"I'm not sorry," Elscol said. "Not sorry that you asked, or that I accepted."

"You aren't, are you?" Aref'ja's gold eyes searched hers. She'd told him why she had fired on *Valor*, but he still didn't understand. It seemed incomprehensible to him that a woman could betray her sworn mission just to save the child of a man she hadn't seen in decades.

She tried to make him understand. It was the only thing left she wanted. "I've never worn a uniform like you, Bren. I mean, I *have* worn uniforms, but they never really fit. This captain's one certainly didn't."

"You aren't an officer," Aref'ja said. "But you know how to fight and fight hard. That's why I asked you to join my cause."

"It was never about fighting for a cause, not really. Not even when I spent all those years waging my own guerrilla war against the Empire."

Her mind drifted back through the decades. She remembered her mission with Myri's mother, still grieving the loss of her own husband. Iella had been ethical to a fault and refused to give in to her anger toward the Imperials. Iella had wanted justice, not revenge, and Elscol had marveled at how different the two of them were. Her own hunger for payback, years after Throm's death, had been unabated.

It hadn't really faded until after the war with the Imps was officially over. Then she'd surrendered herself to husband and family and tried to fashion the kind of life normal beings had, only for the Vong to come and take it away and bring back to her all the bloodthirsty anger of twenty years previous.

"I fought for myself," Elscol said at least. "I fought to give back some of the hurt they'd given me. Imps, Vong, it didn't matter. It was always about giving back hurt."

Aref'ja considered it for a long time. Then he asked, "What changed?"

"Nothing changed. It was always about *people*. People I loved, people I lost. People I pulled myself away from, but never stopped caring about."

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"And you would give up everything, even your own revenge, just for the daughter of an estranged friend?"

Elscol smiled sadly. "I think I just did."

Aref'ja blew out a long breath. He held her eyes and said, "In the end it doesn't matter why you did it. It only matter *what* you did. Daala is furious, as you can imagine. I've committed myself to this alliance, Elscol. I'm still committed."

"I know. I just want you to understand."

Aref'ja nodded but avoided her eyes. "I understand."

Her arm shot out and grasped his wrist hard enough to hurt. His gaze met hers and held. She said, "I can betray a uniform, but I'd never betray a friend. Do you understand that at least?"

She saw in his eyes that he did. He nodded sadly and tugged his paw away. She let it go.

"Come," Aref'ja rose to his feet. "It's time."

Elscol stood up. She walked steadily toward the door. Aref'ja followed a few steps behind her.

The next room was stark and gray. Five soldiers in Alliance uniforms stood against one wall with their blaster rifles at their sides. Next to the nearest trooper was Miranda Fardreamer. Elscol nearly stopped as she passed close to the girl. Their eyes met and lingered. In Miranda's she saw anger and regret burrowed deep beneath a pile of cold grief.

Miranda was so much like the woman Elscol had been that she almost cried.

She couldn't think of anything to say, so she walked on. She walked over to the bulkhead opposite the troopers and turned to face them. Aref'ja lingered by the door next to Miranda.

"Rifles!" Aref'ja shouted, baring canines. "At arms!"

The soldiers moved in crisp unison. They snapped the guns against their chests, then raised them to eye-level and levelled the barrels. Elscol stared down five guns and didn't flinch.

"On my mark!" Aref'ja bellowed. "One!"

Elscol's eyes caught Miranda's again. Even from the far side of the room she could tell they were wet with restrained tears. Elscol held her head high and squared her shoulders.

"Two!"

She wondered if Throm would have been proud of her. She hoped so. He had always been wiser, gentler. When she'd lost him she'd lost parts of herself, good parts, which she's thought lost forever, even during that brief reprisal of happiness when she'd held a newborn son in her arms.

"Three!"

Maybe the good parts had come back, at the end. She hoped so.

"Fire!"

Elscol smiled. There was a flare of light, a burst of noise, and nothing at all.

Epilogue: Found

Stars without number drifted through space. Against the backdrop sat a planet: rich in the greens and blues and cloud-whisps of a living world. Against the vastness of black space, it seemed small, brilliant, luminous, even with the dark patches on its southern hemisphere, scars of some past devastation. Wounded or not, it seemed like it could endure against empty eternity forever.

In unison, two starships winked into existence over the planet. One was an angular dark-gray wedge, the other marked by an elegantly curved hull. Together they angled toward the planet, and the string of spacecraft already in orbit.

What followed was a short burst of activity. Holo-transmissions bounced from ship to ship. A shuttle left *Celestials* bay and went straight for the carrier *Corusca Gem*, sitting at the lead of the orbiting ships. Another darted from *Gem* to *Starless*. Finally, a shuttle left *Celestial* and headed to *Starless*.

Myri Antilles sat next to her cousin in the rear of the cockpit, but neither of them spoke. She strained against her crash webbing to get a better view of the planet below. She'd heard of it, seen holos of it, but she'd never expected to see Zonama Sekot with her own eyes. Her first feeling was a tinge of disappointment. It was a pretty world from above, if you looked past the scarring in the southern hemisphere. It had fat swirls of clouds, shining blue oceans, and large continents swathed with deep greens. She

pictured a planet covered in virtually-unspoiled wilderness, the utter antithesis of the duracrete-covered artificial wasteland of Coruscant. She didn't feel anything *else* though; not the heavy weight of whatever destiny this planet bore, certainly not the touch of the world's supposedly consciousness. It was a pretty planet, and an important one, but it was still just a planet.

Of course, Myri was more excited about other things.

When the shuttle set down in *Starless's* hangar bay, Myri and Jagged Fel were the first ones down the ramp. Standing at the bottom, at the head of a half-dozen Alliance security officers, was Traest Kre'fey. The white-furred Bothan looked positively brilliant under the hangar's bright lights.

He took Jag's hand first, then Myri's. If he noticed the cast, bandages, or eyepatch his commander was sporting, he didn't show it. He put one paw on Jag's shoulder and led him toward the nearest exit. Myri felt a little slighted, but only until her gaze drifted past the heads of the retreating security team and found the mob behind them.

Myri broke into a sprint, right into Piggy's stomach. The Gamorrean grunted but held his ground as Myri did her best to wrap her arms around his massive body.

"It's good to see you too," Voort said.

By then everyone else had gathered around too. Thaymes patted one shoulder and Sharr another. When she detached from Voort she was immediately swept off her feet by Huhunna, who twirled her in a circle and let off a big Wookiee cheer. When her feet touched down Myri spun, dizzy, right into Jesmin's arms.

When the two finally pulled back from their embrace they didn't let go.

"Hey, you don't look *too* terrible," Jesmin's eyes were bright as she ruffled Myri's hair.

"Gee, you know how to flatter," Myri stuck out her tongue.

"You should thank her," Trey said from behind. "She was the one who blew that tractor beam."

"Oh yeah," Myri said. She ruffled Jesmin's head back. "Thanks, Ranger."

"No problem," the other woman pulled Myri's hand back and tried to straighten her long blonde hair.

Myri put that hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "Seriously, that was amazing. Was it... you know?"

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"I think so," Jesmin smiled. It was an uncharacter-istically shy smile, a little secretive, and a little wistful, like she was recalling something beautiful she wished she could see again.

Myri looked around the rest of the group. She hadn't been sure if all of the Wraiths survived the battle, but here they were, each and every one of them.

She looked over the group again and noticed that it was *only* Wraiths. She stepped away from Jesmin and let her hands fall to her sides. Sensing the sudden change in her mood, nobody else moved to hug her.

"Hey," Myri said, "I heard this is my sister's ship."

"That's right," said Voort.

"So, um... Is she around?"

"We got a message from her," Scut said. She looked at the Yuuzhan Vong, really *looked* at him, for the first time. Everyone else was still glowing from the joy of her return, but on his masquered face she saw a dozen conflicted feelings and realized what a strange time this must be for him, a homecoming yet not one at all.

"What did she say?" Myri asked, because as much as she wanted to know what Scut was going through she wanted to see her sister more.

"She said she'll be in her quarters, and you should see her as soon as you're ready."

Silence lingered. All eyes were on her.

Myri straightened her flight suit and said, "Okay. I'm ready now."

Without any fanfare, a small shuttle slipped out of *Corusca Gem's* cavernous landing bay and began a controlled fall to the planet below. As the verdure of Zonama Sekot's upper hemisphere filled her viewport, Jaina Solo grasped the shuttle's controls. The stick shook in her hand as Sekot's upper atmosphere buffeted the craft. Streaks of clouds raced past the viewport, flashed white in her eyes, and were gone just as fast.

"Planetary control was very specific," Tahiri was saying from the co-pilot's seat. "Only the three of us are allowed to come down."

"I hope it's not *just* us," Jaina said. "I have a hurt friend and I think this planet can help him."

"We'll have to talk to Sekot. But for now, it's just the three of us," Tahiri said.

Jaina spared a glance over her shoulder. Ben was in the seat behind Tahiri, secure in his crash webbing with both hands gripping his seat-rests as the atmosphere continued to buffer their tiny shuttle. He'd barely said anything to Jaina or Tahiri the entire trip and seemed only half-interested in the planet he was about to visit for the first time since he was an infant.

As for Tahiri, Jaina could feel a calm sense of anticipation. Unlike Jaina, who had only been on this planet briefly during the final stages of the Yuuzhan Vong War, Tahiri had lived here for five years. There were probably people here she was worried about, but her worry didn't show at all. She seemed more peaceful than Jaina could remember in many, many years.

She would have been glad for her friend, but Jaina was too busy fighting some strong wind. After clearing another layer of clouds, they were close enough to get a good look at the planet's surface. Jaina saw vast spreads of bora trees, a few large lakes dappled with sunlight and shadow. She didn't spot any of the floating airships she remembered from her last visit, nor did she see any artificial buildings. She knew that Sekotan architecture worked hard to meld with nature, and it was possible she was simply overlooking them.

"These *are* the coordinates you got, right?" Jaina asked.

"Right," Tahiri nodded. "They said there was a landing field."

"And who was this *they* you were talking to? Yuuzhan Vong? Ferroan?"

"It was an audio link, so I'm not sure, but I think it was one of the planet's natives."

"Ferroans then," Jaina said. She felt a little better about that than if Tahiri had been talking to a Yuuzhan Vong. She didn't hate the species, despite everything their war had put her through, but she certainly didn't trust them at the moment. Some Vong, at least, were on the warpath again. They could have been renegades, or a whole new warrior culture could have been reborn on Zonama since the planet went missing after the Swarm War.

Still, Tahiri didn't seem bothered that they were flying into the unknown. Jaina tried to take some solace from her friend's confidence.

"Look," Tahiri said, and stabbed a finger forward.

Jaina squinted at the forest. "I don't see anything."

"There's a landing field. Four o'clock."

"I don't... Wait, I see it."

Jaina dived toward the opening she saw in the treeline. She turned down the shuttle's main thrusters and fired the repulsorlifts. The shuttle initiated a steady vertical descent. The landing struts extended and the shuttle rocked only a little as they touched down in the middle of a spread of tall-grass.

Jaina turned off the engines and repulsors, then everything else. For a moment the three of them sat in silence in the darkened cockpit and stared out the viewport. Tall grass spread out for acres ahead of them and in the distance tall bora trees reached for a blue sky marked with high white clouds.

"It's a field," Ben deadpanned.

"A *landing* field," Tahiri corrected.

"Are you *sure* someone's going to meet us here?" Jaina asked. "I didn't see anybody around. No buildings, no ships, nothing."

"This is what they said." Tahiri unbuckled her crash webbing and left the cockpit. Ben followed and finally so did Jaina.

They went to the shuttle's cargo hold and gathered their supplies. All three of them were dressed in jumpsuits marked by dappled greens and browns, and their gear included backpacks, macrobinoculars, soil- and water-sampling equipment, and of course their lightsabers. Tahiri had once spent days on this planet without shelter and supplies, and she insisted on being properly equipped this time.

Jaina still had no idea what lay ahead of them. Tahiri may have been fine with not knowing, but Jaina wasn't. In addition to her lightsaber, she stuck a blaster pistol in her belt and stuck an extra canteen in her pack.

When everyone was ready, they opened the landing ramp and walked outside.

A cool wind swept across the field. Tall grass swayed around their hips and waists and Jaina's hair blew in her face. She reached out with the Force and tried to pick out any sentient beings, but all she found was a huge wash of *life*: grasses, trees, insects, birds. It was dizzying being surrounded by so much life, but comforting as well. She remembered this same feeling from her last time on this planet.

She looked at her companions. Tahiri was leading the group, walking deeper into the field even as the tall green grass-blades swiped at her elbows. Ben, finally, looked alert. His head was high and he scanned the field and

forest with one hand on his lightsaber but with an expression of growing wonder on his face.

Tahiri gasped. Ben stopped in his tracks, unhooked his lightsaber, but didn't ignite it. Jaina sidestepped and craned her neck to get a better view of what lay ahead.

A figure parted the grass and walked toward them. When she saw his face Jaina froze in shock: she couldn't walk, couldn't move, couldn't even breathe.

Up ahead, a welcoming smile appeared beneath dark eyes and thick brown hair as her twin brother walked to meet them.

Syal Antilles stood in front of the mirror in her quarters. She brushed the hair from her face and looked into her eyes. They were tired eyes that hadn't seen sleep in days, eyes kept open only by continual stimulants.

Even now, residual nervous energy jolted her body. She stepped away from the mirror, paced across her small captain's quarters, then turned back to the mirror. From halfway across the room she could see the creased uniform she wore. She couldn't remember how long she'd been in it; probably about as long as she'd been awake.

When her door-buzzer rang she nearly jumped off her feet. She swallowed, looked herself in the mirror one more time, then went to the door.

It opened to silver-topped blur. Syal stumbled three steps back then fell right onto her bed. Myri pinned her there, one arm wrapped around her shoulders and the other around her waist. Syal's hands fumbled to hug Myri back.

Her sister's body was shaking. Syal didn't know why until she heard Myri's fast, high-pitched laughter half-muffled by her own shoulder. She snaked her hands across Myri's back and pulled her closer.

Syal started to shake too. She couldn't tell if it was laughter or sobs or both. Water ran from her tired eyes and left pools on the bedspread. Syal's arms closed like a vise around Myri's shoulders until her sister tapped her one, twice, three times on the side. Exhausted, she let her arms fall. She didn't even have the strength to lift them anymore.

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Myri picked her face off her sister's shoulder. A pale blur, framed by silver and pink, hovered over Syal's head but she couldn't see any more for the tears in her eyes.

"Hey sis," Myri said, soft as a whisper. "Nice smile."

About the Author

When Disney rebooted the *Expanded Universe* in 2014, it brought about the official end of the *Star Wars Legends* continuity. Yet while no new official Legends books have been released since the official end of the Legends line of books, not everyone has been willing to accept that it would seem. Since 2018, HandofThrawn45 has written a number of fan novels which are intended to close off the loose ends created in the wake of Disney's end of the Legends Continuity.

Beginning with an fan adaptation of Christie Golden's *Sword of the Jedi* trilogy, which unfortunately got cancelled when Disney ended the Legends EU, HandofThrawn45 has since also written a follow up trilogy (*Jedi of the Future*), and several additional spinoffs, which include:

Star Wars: Hour of Judgment – A new X-Wing-esc fan novel that acts as a bridge between the X-Wing comics and novels as well as a unofficial third installment to the story of the Hand of Judgement and a prequel to the Thrawn Trilogy.

Star Wars: Sword of the Jedi Trilogy – A fan attempt at trying to write what would have been Christie Golden's *Sword of the Jedi* trilogy that got cancelled when Disney ended the Legends EU. Is set after the Legends novel *Crucible*.

Twilight of the Jedi Duology – Set during the Dark Times era, this fan duology serves as a conclusion to both the *Republic Commando* series as well as *Coruscant Night* series.

Star Wars: Jedi of the Future Trilogy – Set after his *Sword of the Jedi* fan trilogy, this trio of fan novels bridges the more than 40–50-year gap between *Crucible*/HandofThrawn45's *Sword of the Jedi Trilogy* and the *Legacy* comics.

Star Wars: Legacy's Edge – A direct prequel to the *Legacy* comics, and sequel to his *Jedi of the Future Trilogy*, this story depicts the fall of the Galactic Alliance and the Jedi and the rise of Darth Krayt's Sith Empire.

Star Wars: Legacy's End Series – A four-part series set after *Legacy II*, these novels act as a fan equivalent of *Legacy III*, providing a fitting conclusion to both the entire *Legacy* era and the *Legends* continuity as a whole.

